

# THE LIU KUO-SUNG READER

Selected Texts on and by the Artist, 1950s–Present

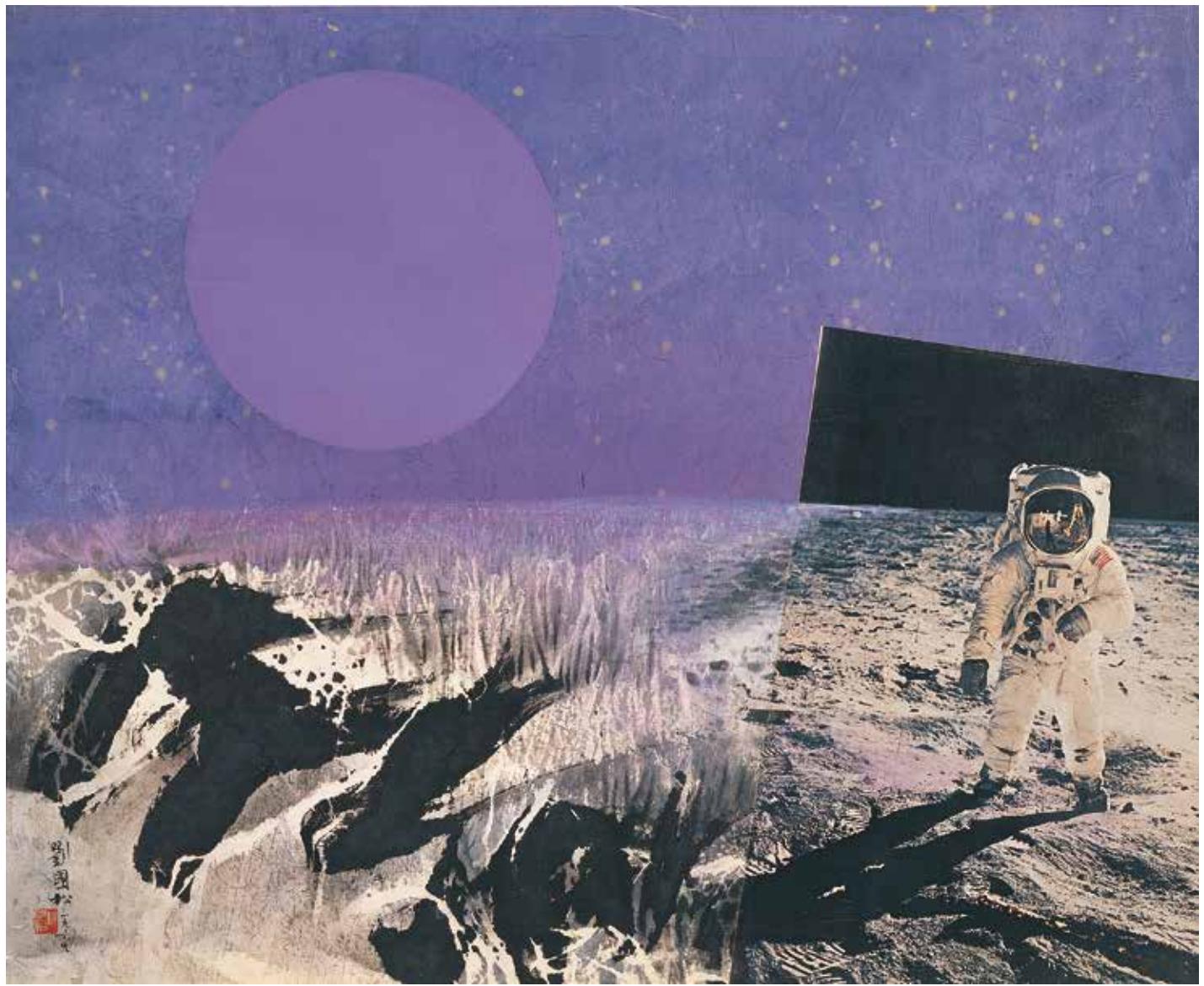
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EUGENE Y. WANG  
VALERIE C. DORAN  
ALAN C. YEUNG  
Editors



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 CAMLab  
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Eugene Y. Yang  
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## INTRODUCTION TO THE READER

**THE HISTORY OF CHINESE PAINTING** bears and demands constant retelling. One way to grasp the complexity and the stakes of this history is to return to Chinese painting's moment of crisis at the onset of modernity. Over the course of the twentieth century, the ink painting tradition was pronounced moribund and subjected to repeated attempts at rejuvenation and reinvention. One of the boldest of such attempts was mounted by Liu Kuo-sung (Liu Guosong, b. 1932). Unlike reformists before him, Liu rejected *bimo* ("brush-and-ink") fundamentalism—the notion that the quintessence of Chinese painting was the dynamic interplay between brushed lines and ink-wash. Emphasizing instead the materiality of paper and the aesthetic and affective potentials of liquid ink on its own, Liu set the stage for Chinese painting to be redefined not as *bimo* but as an instance of *shuimo*, or "ink art," an artistic medium open to abstraction, experimentation, and reinterpretation in non-pictorial media.

Liu Kuo-sung is known as a "metaphysical painter," an epithet devised by his close friend and renowned poet Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong, 1928–2017). His art is metaphysical not in the sense of dematerialization, but quite the opposite: it is animated precisely by the tension between the deep mining and the transcendence of material properties and textures. Above all, Liu's painting is about ways of giving form to change—an age-old issue confronted by Chinese artists traceable to the *Book of Changes*. Having experienced first-hand war and revolution, the legacies of colonialism, and mainland China's economic reform, Liu understands dislocation on the world-historical scale more profoundly than any other living artist in the Sinosphere.

When Liu Kuo-sung returned to the mainland to present his art in the 1980s and 90s, he found enthusiastic reception among artists and viewers there. His formal experiments and powerful compositions, unlike anything they had seen before, resonated with a nation emerging from the devastations of the Maoist era. Positioned in Taiwan and Hong Kong and having visited the United States, Liu was well exposed to international art trends and the new horizons of the Space Age. Now he aligned the emerging visions of astro-futurism with a collective yearning for home and connection, no doubt informed by his own experiences as an orphan and refugee and then as a modernist iconoclast and exile.

Liu Kuo-sung's art and ideas remain resonant today, not only because they continue to inspire contemporary art practices in the Sinosphere and beyond, but also because of the analogies between his formative periods and our times. We seem to be entering another Cold War, another period of great division. The history of Abstract Expressionism is increasingly seen as intertwined with the mid-century Cold War context. Liu, too, lived and worked during this period, but his "abstract" painting tells a radically different story than the master narratives of Western

modernism, one rooted in the specific circumstances of postwar East Asia.

This Reader is intended to anchor a re-reckoning with this history in its full complexity. The anthologized texts, dating from the 1950s onward, include manifestos, memoirs, reviews, opinion pieces, reportage, debates, as well as scholarship, and both reflect the past and illuminate the present. They represent the perspectives and voices of curators, poets, art historians, Liu's fellow modernists in postwar Taiwan, as well as mainland ink artists of a younger generation. In new English translations of Liu's essays on art history and theory, we witness his questioning of and responses to his experiences in real time. We witness his embrace of Western modernism, his rejection of and eventual return to Chinese ink painting aesthetics, and his tireless engagements with other artists and thinkers across aesthetic and geopolitical divides. Of particular note is Liu's debate with the eminent Sinologist Xu Fuguan (1904–1982), who associated Liu's brand of modernist abstraction with communism. This association would have been illegible in the West, apart from the exigencies of cross-Strait relations.

Ultimately, *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader* seeks to allow new trajectories of thought to emerge from the material. An example is in the differing views on the impact of Western abstraction and American Abstract Expressionism on the development of modern Chinese ink painting. A trajectory can be traced from Liu Kuo-sung's earliest essays on this topic of the late 1950s, to Chu-tsing Li's art historically-informed response of 1969, to John Clark's critical reevaluation of Liu's views in 2007, to Wai-lim Yip's expansive East-West framework of 2012, and finally to Lesley Ma's recontextualization of Liu's practice within modern ink art in East Asia in a new essay commissioned for this volume. These trajectories are not linear but twist and turn, animated by Liu Kuo-sung's vivid presence and the constellations of ideas drawn to him. They illuminate issues of art and culture that Liu has confronted throughout his career: the meaning of tradition, the politics of art-making, and the dynamics of creative freedom.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THE CONCEPTION, EVOLUTION, AND PUBLICATION** of *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader* would not have been possible without the collaboration and contributions of a number of individuals, organizations, and institutions from across the spheres of art and scholarship. To them Harvard CAMLab and the Editors would like to extend our sincere thanks.

We are particularly grateful to Liu Kuo-sung, Lin Lee, and The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation for their trust and support throughout the production of this Reader.

We also would like to extend our sincere thanks to the scholars, artists, and poets whose writings are featured in this volume and who have helped to bring into form the constellations of Liu Kuo-sung's art, thought, and life experience.

Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their myriad levels of expertise and support in the preparation of this volume:

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The family of Yu Kwang-chung

The family of Lin Fengmian

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Taiwanese Artist Society

Finally, we would like to extend our appreciation to the institutions, collectors, and artists who have facilitated *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader's* use of images of artworks, including: Anita Lau, Hong Kong; Art Institute of Chicago; Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; British Museum; Cheng Huai House Collection, Taiwan; Lee Chun-yi, Taiwan; Denver Art Museum; Eddy Chan, Hong Kong; Gu Wenda, Gu Wenda Hangzhou Studio; Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Cambridge; Hong Kong Museum of Art; Hsueh-Tu Lu, Taiwan; Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University; Johnson Chang Tsong-Zung; M+, Hong Kong; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; McNay Art Museum, Texas; Ministry of Education, Taiwan; M K Lau Collection, Hong Kong; Morgan Art Foundation, Ltd., USA; Mountain Art Foundation, Taiwan: Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Cognié, Geneva; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum Rietberg Zürich; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea; National Palace Museum, Taipei; National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung; Palace Museum, Beijing; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona; Photographic Archives Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Prof. and Mrs. Wai-lim Yip; Roy Hsu, Taiwan; Shibunkaku Co., Ltd, Kyoto; Shandong Museum, China; Take a Step Back Collection, Hong Kong; The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation, Taiwan; The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City; Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taiwan; Tokyo National Museum; United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC), Taiwan; The Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection, London; Yang Jiechang.

Liu Kuo-sung

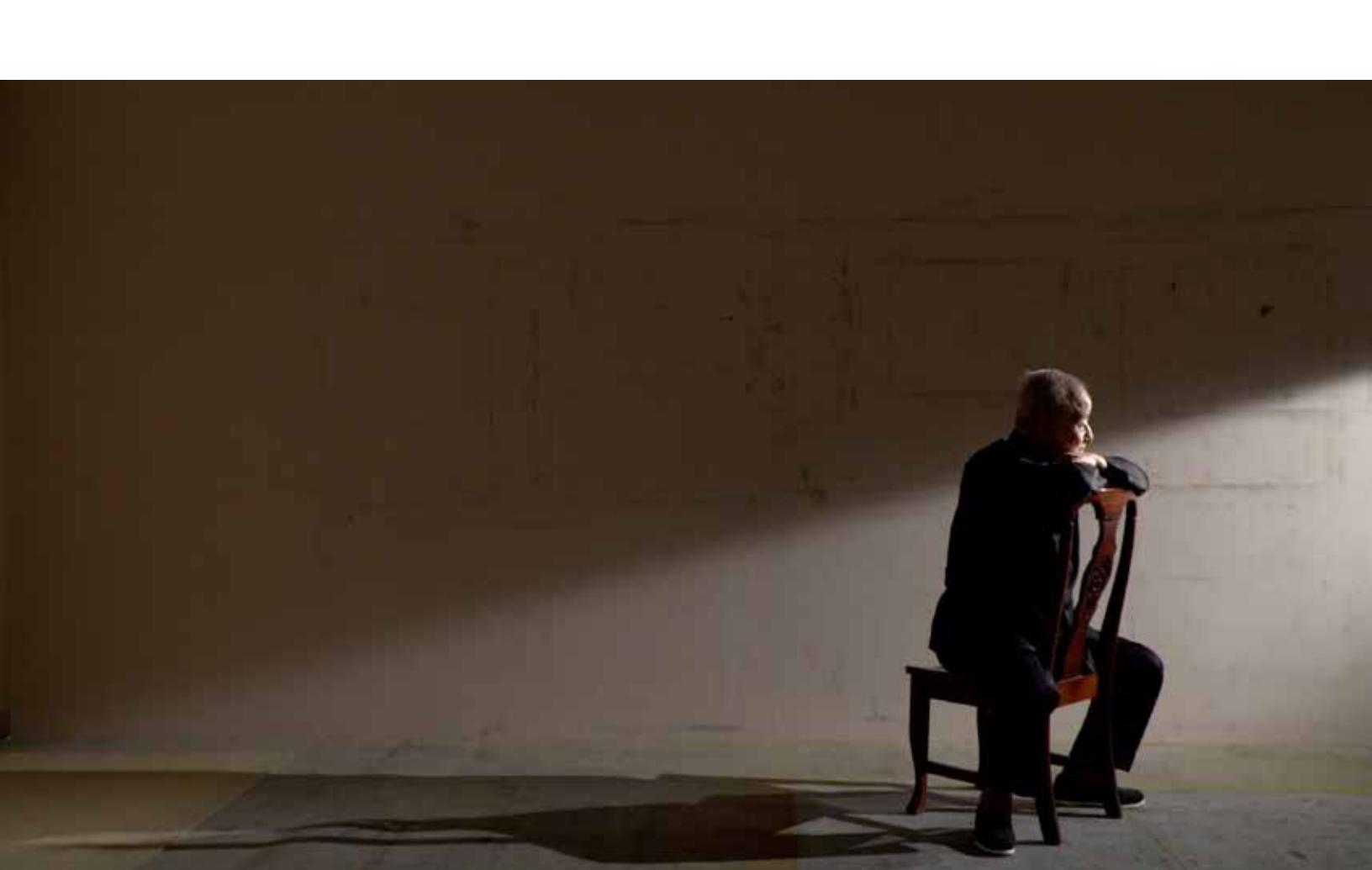
**STATEMENT FROM THE ARTIST**

2021

先求異再求好

*Seek first to be unique, and then to be excellent.*

—LIU KUO-SUNG



## EXPLANATORY NOTES

### Key terms

Certain key terms related to the aesthetics and techniques of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy, and to their evolution in modern and contemporary contexts, appear frequently in this *Reader*. They are defined and described below to provide contextual clarity for the non-specialist reader.

**Bimo** lit. “brush-and-ink,” is regarded as the baseline formal properties of the water-based pictorial medium later known as ink painting. It calls attention to the aggregation of what is roughly wrist-controlled brush drawing on the one hand and freehand diffuse ink wash on the other. The traits derived from their proportional relationship form the basis for connoisseurs and critics to ascertain individual hands or styles and evaluate the authenticity and quality of a painting. Thus, one may refer to a painting as having a certain kind of *bimo*, as having good *bimo*, or (pejoratively) as lacking *bi* (brush) or *mo* (wash).

**Cunfa** lit. “wrinkling method,” is conventionally translated as “texture stroke” in English-language academic literature. Some articles in this *Reader* translate the term as “*cun* techniques.” In its original sense, *cunfa* refers to the brushstrokes and dabs used to render topographical features like mountain ranges and cliff-faces in landscape painting. Over the course of the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) periods, texture strokes were increasingly codified and named, as in “hemp-fiber strokes” and “axe-cut strokes,” and identified with specific painters, periods, and schools. Although Liu Kuo-sung refers to his “plucked tendons, stripped skin” (*choujin bopi*) technique as a kind of *cunfa*, it in fact involves manual tearing of paper fibers in addition to brushwork.

**Guohua** lit. “national painting,” also commonly translated as “Chinese painting,” refers loosely to modern ink painting that employs traditional materials and/or styles. The term emerged





Liu Kuo-sung, Artist's seal on painting *The Yellow Dust*

*Clouds My Dreams of Distant Homeland*, 1961

Red seal paste on oil, plaster, and canvas surface

Size of painting: 36.22 × 73.23 in (92 × 186 cm)

Painting collection of Art Institute of Chicago

in the nativist and modernizing discourses of the late Qing (1644–1911) and Republican (1911–1949) periods and is to be understood in distinction from Western and Western-style painting.

**Shuimo hua** lit. “water-ink painting,” also translated as “ink-wash painting,” is a materials- and medium-based definition of ink painting, as opposed to the cultural and national definition of *guohua*. Modernist innovators such as Liu Kuo-sung increasingly adopted the term *shuimo hua* during the late 1960s and 70s for their own painting practices, and it is now commonly used in the Chinese-speaking sphere.

**Shuimo** lit. “water-ink” and also rendered as “ink wash,” is generally translated into English as “ink art.” Gaining popularity in contemporary Chinese art discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the term remains in active dispute today. Generally, *shuimo* is meant to decenter classical brush-based calligraphy and painting and encompass contemporary art in any medium that responds to, deconstructs, or expands the aesthetic, material, and philosophical aspects of the ink tradition. It is often used in conjunction with other terms, as in *xiandai shuimo* (“modern ink”), *dangdai shuimo* (“contemporary ink”), and *shiyuan shuimo* (“experimental ink”).

**Xieyi** lit. “sketching the idea,” is often translated in English as “freehand painting.” This term refers to painting executed in an abbreviated form and in an intuitive and spontaneous manner. *Xieyi* painting tends to flaunt gestural and calligraphic brushwork and the semi-accidental effects of liquid ink, with little conceptual and procedural separation between drawing, coloring, and modeling. It is often seen as privileging subjective interpretation over objective representation, and as capturing spiritual or metaphysical truth beyond perceptual experience.

## Romanization Systems

The complexity of the historical and geopolitical contexts in which Liu Kuo-sung has lived and worked is reflected in the corresponding romanization systems developed in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere in the Chinese-speaking world from the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century. In the texts included in *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader*, the two most pertinent romanization systems, both based on the Beijing dialect, are *pinyin*, standardized in mainland China via government initiative from the 1950s onward, and the Wade-Giles system (and variations thereof), developed earlier by the British sinologists Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895) and Herbert Giles (1845–1935). While *pinyin* is standard in mainland China and increasingly internationally, the Wade-Giles system was used extensively in the pre-World War II period, and remains current (in a slightly varied form) in Taiwan. The parallel use of both systems is most directly reflected in the alternative renderings “Liu Kuo-sung” / “Liu Guosong.” Other Asian languages and Chinese dialects, particularly Cantonese, have their own romanization schemes.

The texts in this *Reader* are presented to reflect this complex linguistic reality. The content includes translated primary documents from the 1950s and 1960s originally published in Chinese in Taiwanese publications; scholarly essays from the same period originally written and published in English (before the popularization of *pinyin* outside mainland China); as well as translated and English-language texts dating from the mid-1980s to the present and published variously in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the U.S., Australia, and elsewhere. Rather than impose a unified style or system on the texts, we have chosen, where possible, to privilege the style or system appropriate to their respective original contexts while providing alternatives parenthetically.

The Editors

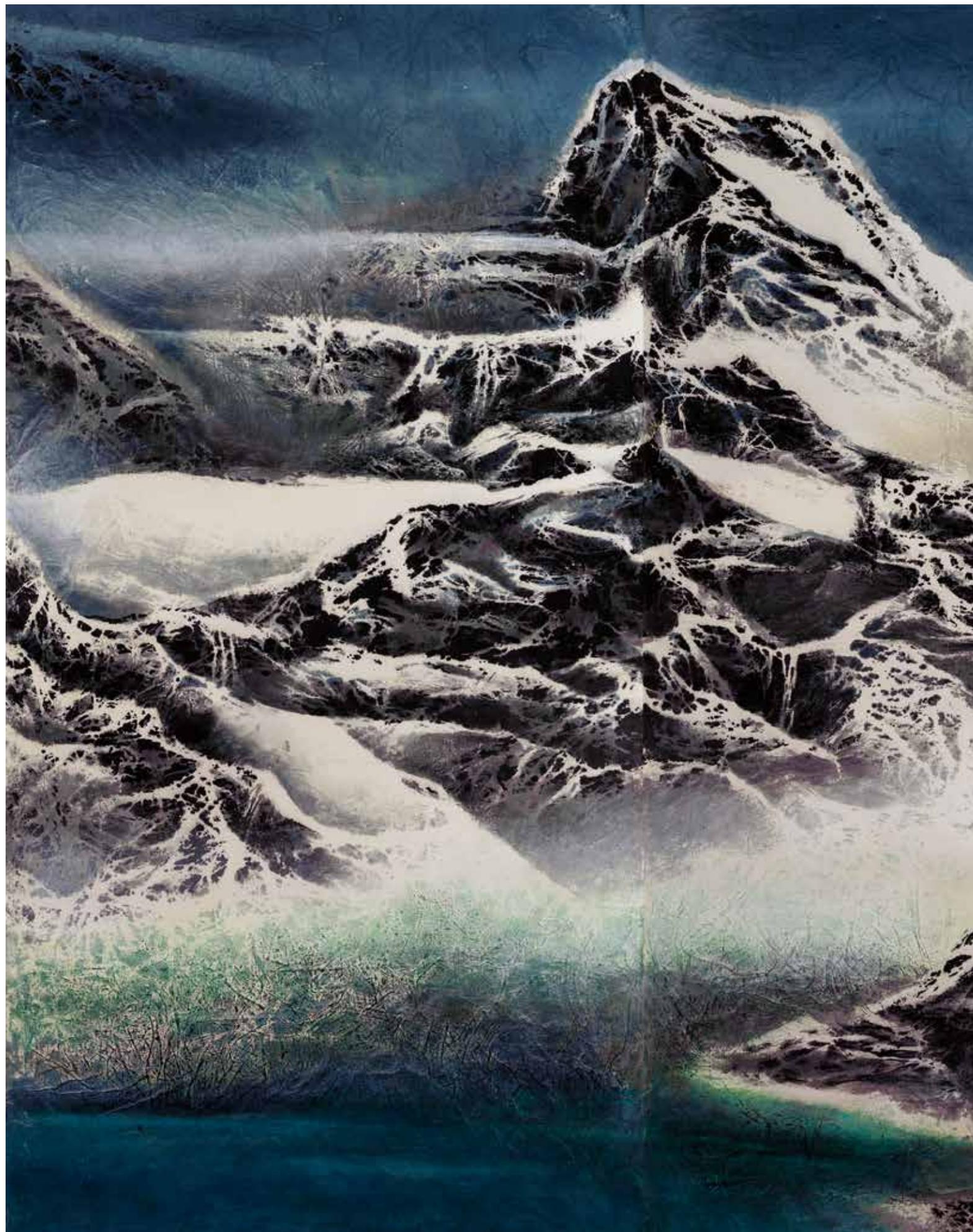
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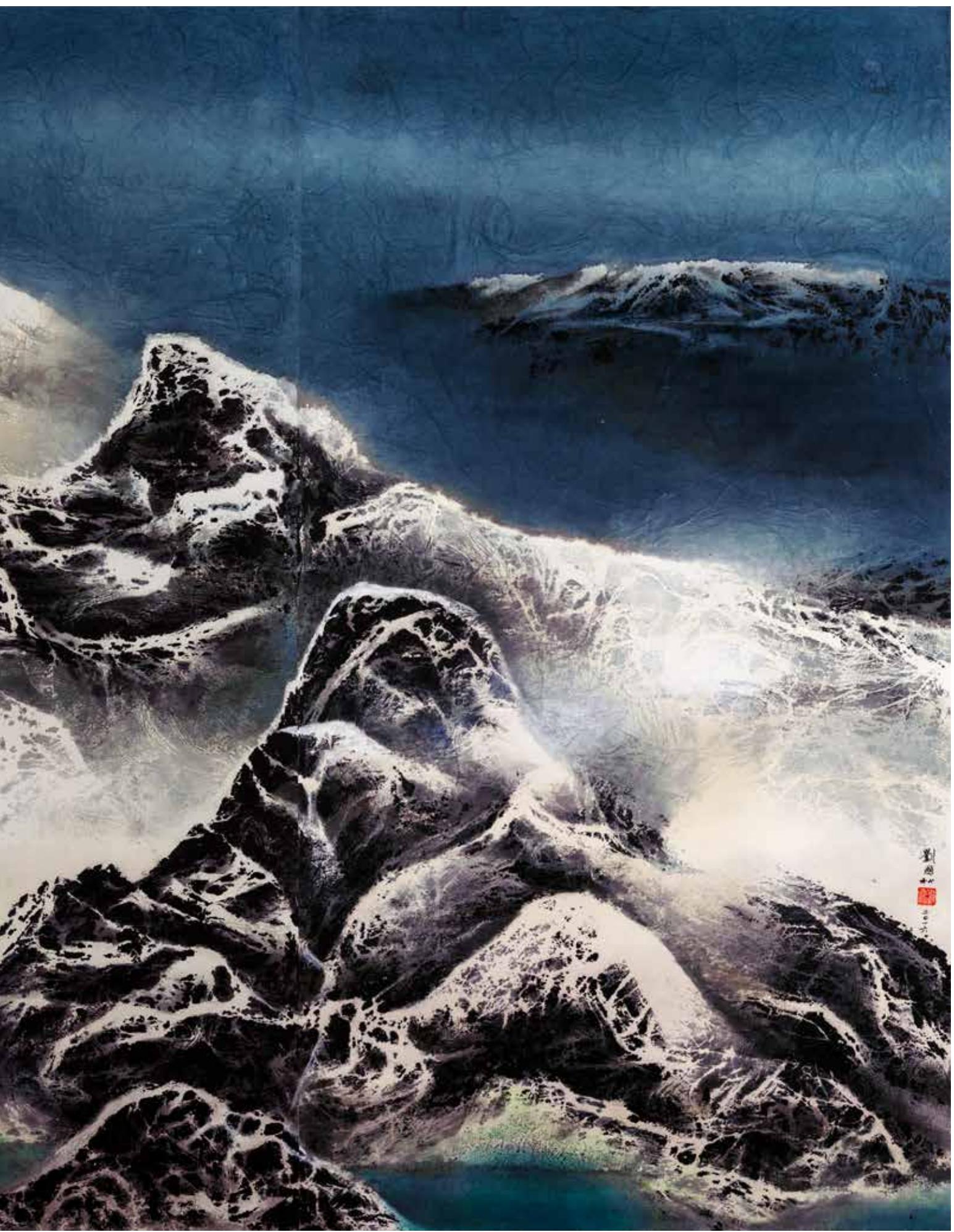
*Blue Sky and Vaporizing White Snow*, 2016

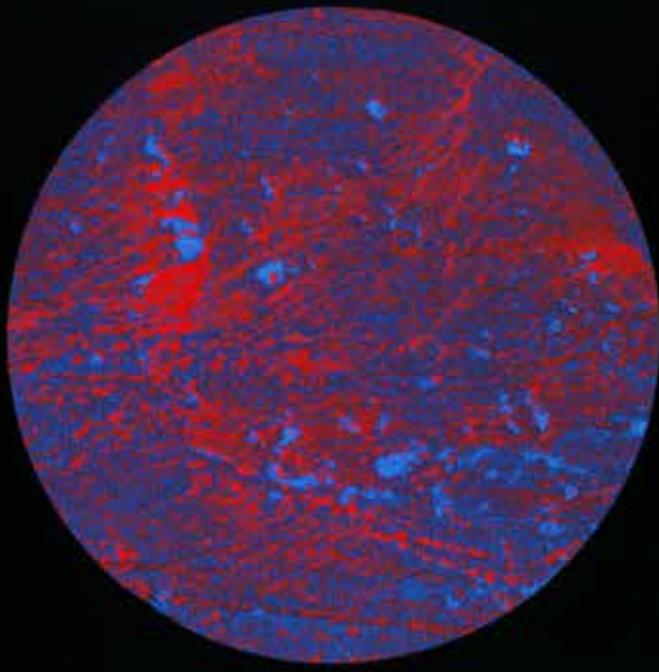
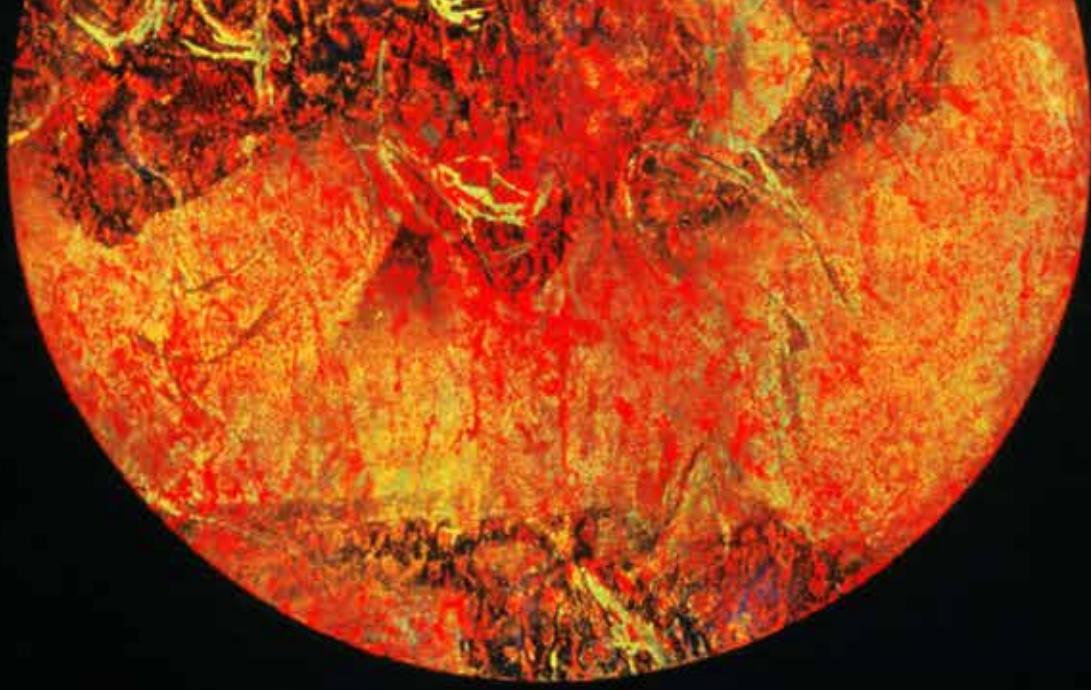
Ink and color on paper

74.02 × 114.17 in (188 × 290 cm)

Private Collection, Taiwan







*Which is Earth? No. 50*, 1969 (detail)  
Ink and color on paper  
58.27 x 30.32 in (148 x 77 cm)  
Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection

Liu Kuo-sung	<b>The Philosophy of Modern Painting: A Critique of Lee Shih-Chiao's Painting Exhibition</b> (1958)
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Liu Kuo-sung

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MODERN PAINTING:  
A CRITIQUE OF LEE SHIH-CHIAO'S PAINTING EXHIBITION  
1958

ON JUNE 13TH, which was the opening day of Mr. Lee Shih-Chiao's painting exhibition, I travelled in a rush all the way from Keelung to Taipei, arriving at the exhibition hall full of eagerness and anticipation.<sup>1</sup> The first paintings to greet my eyes were a still life and another study of fruit. Noting that they were both dated 1952, I assumed that they represented Mr. Lee's first forays into the study of modern painting. Though I thought they were quite good, it wasn't this sort of early attempts that I was thirsty to see, but rather the "fruits" of what Mr. Lee himself has described as the harnessing of Western modern painting—that is, the insights developed by artists from Chardin to our contemporary Picasso—to manifest the thinking and outlook of the Chinese. Needless to say, as I viewed the paintings one by one, I was filled with the eager anticipation of the "viewing audience" in a movie theatre waiting for the main feature to begin. And so I galloped through the show until, at last, I came to the final painting, *Among the Trees* (*Shujian*); and then I was suddenly filled with an odd sense of unease. I couldn't quite tell if it was disappointment or sadness at the shattering of my illusions about my idol. In the artwork before me, the expressive techniques of Pierre Bonnard could be clearly discerned, and yet the overall conceptual thinking seemed to be stuck in the Impressionist mode. And as for his work *Art Studio* (*Huashi*), which so clearly imitates Braque's Cubist style, how could this represent the results of his so-called current research on Picasso? Amidst these nagging doubts, I suddenly thought of something one of his students had said: "Mr Lee Shih-Chiao's paintings are founded on profound philosophical ideas." My mind went back and forth, and around in circles, but where was this getting me? After walking around for another hour, during which time I studied the works with ever deeper attention and discernment, I still had to ask: on exactly which profound philosophical ideas are these works based?

In looking at these compositions, it was clear that they are all representational works. The artistic (and aesthetic) philosophy that is founded on the imitation or representation of nature has a very long history. As early as the age of Aristotle, the ability to "imitate" or "model after" was already recognized as one of Man's innate talents. In a later era, T. Lipps and J.I. Volkelt developed the concept of empathy, based on the enduring human urge towards mimesis. The concept of empathy posits that we project our direct experience of nature onto the objects of our perception, so that they become vividly and authentically alive to us. The effect of this kind of imaginative function is nothing less than to cause the "objects of perception" to imitate "what exists in the mind;" the result is a fusion of subject and object which we experience as a sense of aesthetic pleasure and appreciation. This certainly defines the philosophical framework for painting in the pre-Fauvist period, but hardly reflects the significant changes that have taken place in the philosophy of painting since then.

Beginning in 1950, after his escape from East to West Berlin, W. Worringer began to propagate his theory that, in the creation of art, man has an urge towards both mimesis and towards abstraction, and that the urge towards abstraction is the counterpoint to the urge towards mimesis. In the introduction to his book *Problems of Style*, the Idealist theoretician A. Riegel states: "Art has two main attributes! Flatness and immobility; The first seeks to dismiss the sense of space occupied by objects of nature; the latter seeks to maintain the immutability of the object." And in his book *The Problem of Form*, the sculptor von Hilderbrand expresses that rather than confusing our visual sense, this flat plane is intended as a kind of haptic space that engages our sense of tactility.

Once we understand the urge towards abstraction as the philosophical framework of modern art, we can also understand the following: Why, since the advent of Cubism, modern art has moved more and more towards the flat plain; why the school of Abstraction has had such a seminal impact on the international art world; and why our compatriot Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji) has been recognized as one of the ten most important modern artists in the world. Turning our attention back to the works of Mr. Lee Shih-Chiao, we see that his aesthetic foundation is still that of nature as the object of imitation (naturalism), and that, as such, empirical facts are his starting point for understanding the world; and also that in his own discourse he places far too much emphasis on the "emotional" stance of Impressionism.

The nature of a "solo exhibition" is always quite straightforward: Mr. Lee took over 90 paintings executed over the last seven years, and displayed them for the world to see. What is most admirable in these works is the clear evidence of his dedication to painting, his industry, and his spirit of meticulous scholarship. Critiquing this body of work as a whole, his form and structure are quite good, while his color schemes are somewhat lacking in "emotional" tone, with the still lifes being better than the landscapes. The most outstanding quality of his paintings is their sense of solidity: one can see how much work he put into the fundamentals, and this is not something every artist can achieve so well. Occasionally, in certain paintings, one can see that he is beginning to shift his orientation towards a repudiation of perspective; yet one then must question why we don't also see a break from traditional concepts of distance, space, and chiaroscuro? Is the power of texture and volume really so irresistible? If, as he has stated, he truly wants to subvert the distance between Chinese Western-style painting and Western modern painting, by harnessing Western modern painting techniques to manifest Chinese ideas—such as the expressive techniques of the abstract flat picture plane; and Chinese points of view—that to discuss painting as form-likeness is to show no more insight than that of a child,<sup>2</sup> then as regards the question of the best way that this can be achieved, I can only say that Elder Lee must have a much better understanding than does this writer!

(Translation by Valerie C. Doran)

This article was previously published in Chinese as "Xiandai huihua de zhexue sixiang: jianping Li Shiqiao huazhan," *United Daily News Literary Supplement* (Lianhebao fukan), June 16, 1958.

## Notes

- 1 [Lee Shih-Chiao (Li Shiqiao, 1908–1995), Taiwanese painter and educator. Lee studied painting in Japan in the 1930s, excelling in *yōga* (Western-style painting). After returning to Taiwan in the postwar period, he experimented with different modernist styles, and was best known as a figurative painter.]
- 2 [Liu here references lines from a poem by Su Shi (1037–1101), "Shu Yanling Wang zhubo suo hua zhezhi er shou" (Written on a Painting of a Broken Branch by Registrar Wang of Yanling). For full translation and a discussion of the poem, see Ronald Egan, "Poems on Paintings: Su Shih and Huang T'ing-chien," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43, no. 2 (Dec., 1983): 425–426.]

Liu Kuo-sung

WRITTEN ON THE EVE OF THE FIFTH MOON EXHIBITION

1958

**GOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT ASIDE**, the artistic vitality of a nation relies on the vibrancy of its artistic organizations (and exhibitions) and on whether these can foster young talents. When artistic organizations are plentiful, competition within and among them motivates artists to better themselves and avoid complacency, and creates the necessary context for comparative evaluation and criticism. A well-developed system of criticism expunges all art that is insincere, mediocre, or pandering, thereby opening a virtuous cycle of regeneration in the art field. An artist's identity and status are then based on strictly academic merit, as opposed to social connection and capital. Such is the reason that we organize the Fifth Moon exhibitions.

Moreover, as we are aware, few artists nowadays possess the material means to organize solo exhibitions. Among us recent graduates in art, only a fortunate few earn enough of a salary as secondary school teachers to afford pigments. However much we wish to share our art and ideas with the world, we can scarcely hope to be included in an exhibition. But we are earnest and committed art workers. We do not want our passions and aspirations to fade into obscurity. The only solution to our financial situation is for us to mount our own exhibition, with which we hope to inspire future graduates and provide a model for them to showcase the fruits of their labor. Such is the objective of the Fifth Moon exhibitions.

We have already mounted two Fifth Moon exhibitions. Some people have noted that we are far from homogeneous as a group. Given that we were classmates and went through the same rigorous academic training, one might expect our art to look almost identical. Yet our works are stylistically diverse, and this diversity is both our intention and what modern painting values. In spite of our differences, we still share some common characteristics: an unmistakable, irrepressible vitality and an unaffected and acute sensibility. We are not like the Impressionists, whose paintings are like

windows into a sunlit world. We do not merely imitate others or distinguish ourselves by caprice or willful eccentricity. We are faithful only to art itself as we each pursue a unique path of our own.

A common misconception is that the "non-figurative" (*fei xingxiang*) is by definition new. In fact, newness in art is a quality of thought and expression and not only one of form. Modern painting is not restricted to issues of figuration, and reforming figuration alone does not constitute revolutionary progress in art. Figurative or not, our paintings issue from our first-hand experiences. Although we do not particularly emphasize their newness, we aim to present that which has not been presented by others. Equally, although we are aware of the efficacy of acting as a collective, we choose not to identify as or with any particular school. As Georges Braque once said, "When you begin a painting, you never know how it will ultimately look. Every work is a journey into the unknown."<sup>1</sup>

We feel fortunate that the third Fifth Moon exhibition has not been derailed by the addition of new members, and even more so that the prior Fifth Moon exhibitions have achieved their purpose of catalyzing new artistic endeavors, such as the Ton Fan Group's exhibition in November last year and the Joint Exhibition of Four Navy Painters earlier this month. These will be new voices in the art field. If we wish for the renaissance of our nation and people, we must infuse them with young blood. If we wish for a new beginning in the culture and art of our nation, we must shine a light upon our young talents and support their participation and competition in the international art world.

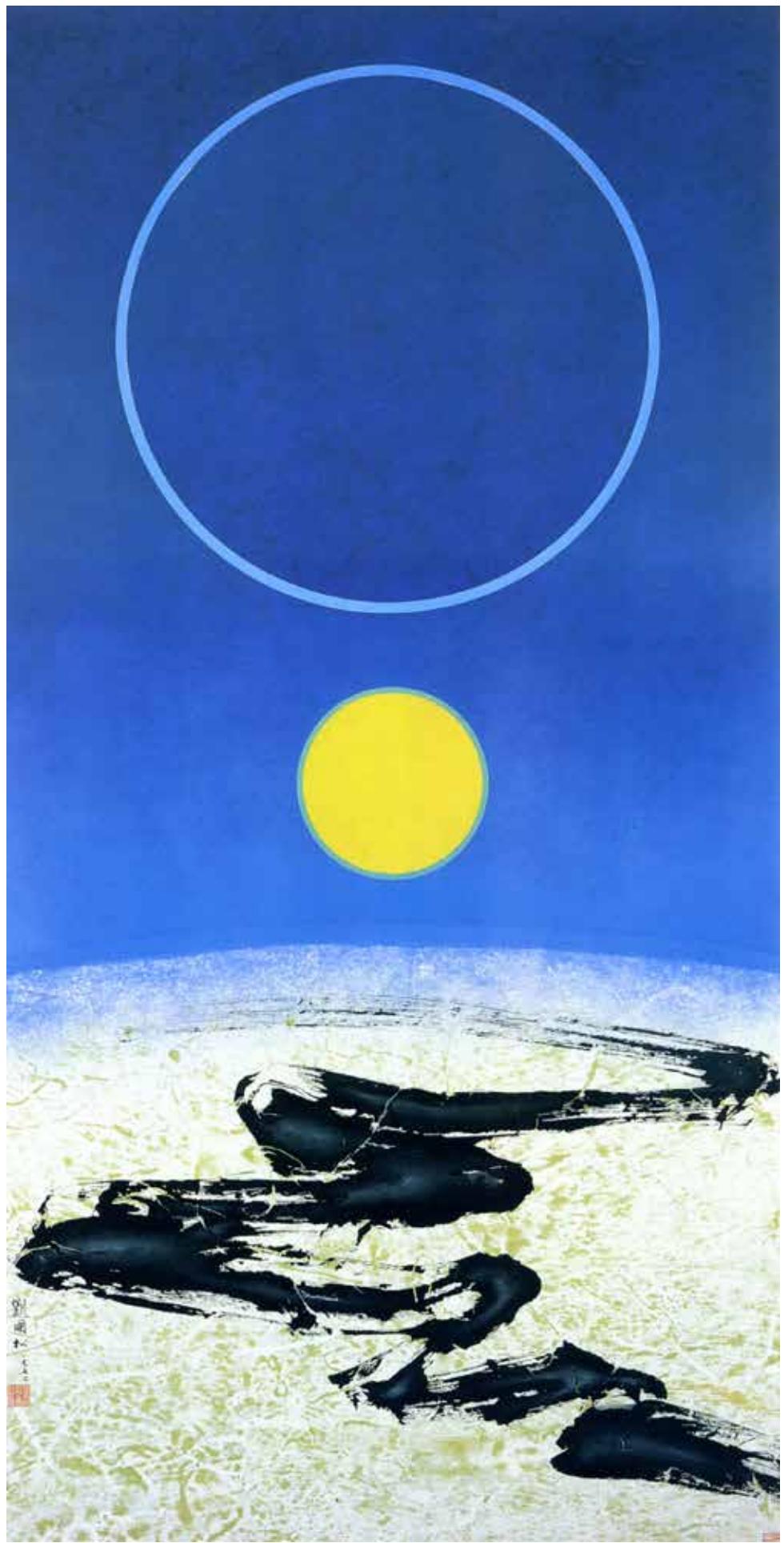
(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

This article was previously published in Chinese as "Xie zai Wu yue huazhan zhi qian," *Central Daily News (Zhongyang ribao)*, May 1958.

1 [The editors were unable to source the original quotation.]

*Central Ring*, 1972

Ink and acrylic on paper  
70.47 x 36.22 in (179 x 92 cm)



Liu Kuo-sung

MODERN ART AND SOVIET RUSSIAN AESTHETICS

1961

1. Preface

Make [the pupil] understand that confessing an error which he discovers in his own argument even when he alone has noticed it is an act of justice and integrity, which are the main qualities he pursues; stubbornness and rancor are vulgar qualities, visible in common souls whereas to think again, to change one's mind and to give up a bad case in the heat of the argument are rare qualities showing strength and wisdom.

—Montaigne, "On Educating Children"<sup>1</sup>

A nation's renaissance is often presaged by the intellectual and artistic renewal of its people. Our nation's century-long desolation is reflected in my fellow countryfolk's spiritual listlessness. If spring is to come for our nation, we should expect to see its first signs in the arts. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the first "spring swallow" to emerge in art was the revolutionary painter Gao Jianfu, who, however, was almost immediately battered by frigid winds, unable to soar freely. The second spring swallow was the abstract painter Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji)—now one of the ten foremost painters of Paris—who unfortunately was soon scared away to Europe by the menacing gunshots of hunters. After the mainland fell, young artists awakened to a shared aspiration towards a Chinese Renaissance. Regardless of pain and poverty, we are determined to devote ourselves to the theory and practice of modern art in order to rescue Chinese art from its centuries-long stagnation. Inevitably, we have attracted censure and repudiation. But now the swallows have gained greatly in number, causing the hunters to lose their aim. In response they have devised the stratagem of smothering the swallows under a giant "red hat." But the hunters are wrong: this is not the dark realm of Communists, but a free China under a "Blue Sky with a White Sun." Here, under the just rule of a democratic government, immoral and groundless accusations are not permissible and have no effect on young artists' determination or on the robust development of modern art. If the accusations issue from conservative painters, we may well dismiss them as the result of artistic differences or jealousy. But if they begin to influence intellectuals, government officials, educators, and even politicians lacking a grasp of modern art, then we have no choice but to oppose them explicitly.

Here I have no wish to dispute the senseless accusations against modern artists one by one. Rather, I would simply like to clarify whether and how modern art relates to the aesthetic theories of the Communist Party.

2. The Aesthetics of Soviet Russia

Art cannot take the places of politics and economics, or of science and warfare. For example, war is fought with real guns and bullets; victory on a theatrical stage means nothing. The Communists claim that literature and art are weapons—this is an absurdism. Even if they deploy propaganda as a weapon, even if they do so effectively, propaganda remains mere propaganda and is fundamentally different from literature.... The value of literature and art does not lie in their misuse as weapons.

—Hu Qiuyuan

As is well known, the Chinese Communists engage in wholesale imitation of Soviet Russia. Their cultural policies, like their other policies, are replicas of those of their Soviet masters. The Communist Party of China, in its very nature, is not an independent political entity, but rather the Chinese branch of the Communist International. To understand the Chinese Communists' cultural policies, therefore, we must first study those of Soviet Russia.

One of the first Communist texts on the question of literature and art is Lenin's 1905 essay "Party Organization and Party Literature," in which he advances the notion of "party literature":

[Literature] must become party literature in contradistinction to bourgeois customs, to the profit-making, commercialized bourgeois press, to bourgeois literary careerism and individualism, "aristocratic anarchism" and drive for profit.... What is this principle of party literature? It is not simply that, for the socialist proletariat, literature cannot be a means of enriching individuals or groups: it cannot, in fact, be an individual undertaking, independent of the common cause of the proletariat. Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen! Literature must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, "a cog and a screw" of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.<sup>2</sup>

In Lenin's conception, literature is no more than "a cog and a screw" in the Communist enterprise and has no independent value. On June 18, 1925, the Russian Communist Party produced a document entitled "On the Policy of the Party in the Sphere of Artistic Literature." Among its central tenets:

Thus, as the class struggle has not ceased among us in general, so, too, it has not ceased on the literary front. In a class society there is not and cannot be neutral art...<sup>3</sup> (paragraph 4)

and

... leadership in the sphere of literature belongs to the working class as a whole, with all its material and ideological resources. There is not yet a hegemony of proletarian writers, and the Party must help these writers win for themselves the historic right to this hegemony.<sup>4</sup> (paragraph 9)

As is evident from these excerpts, the purpose of art is inseparable from class struggle: art exists because of class and must itself engage in class struggle. Moreover, the Party must help the proletariat in its struggle to achieve hegemony in the fields of art and literature.

The document further delineates the proletariat's mission and the Party's duty in leading and aiding proletarian writers, and states that the Party's literature should suit the level of the peasants—that is, to be catered to the masses:

[Party literature should] be a literature... of a great, fighting class, leading millions of peasants.... The Party must stress the necessity of the creation of artistic literature intended for the mass readership of workers and peasants; ... and, utilizing all the technical accomplishments of the old masters, choose an appropriate form that will be understandable to millions.<sup>5</sup>

After Josef Stalin seized power and established himself as dictator, he not only remained faithful to Lenin's cultural and artistic policies but also broadened and systematized their application. On April 23, 1932, the Party Central Committee passed a resolution to abolish all literary and artistic organizations of "these organizations might change from being an instrument for the maximum mobilization of Soviet writers and artists for the tasks of Socialist construction to being an instrument for cultivating elitist withdrawal and loss of contact with the political tasks of the present and with the important groups of writers and artists who sympathize with Socialist construction" and decreed the formation of a "single union of Soviet Writers."<sup>6</sup>

As these passages show, the literature and art of Communist Parties are mere political tools used to glorify class struggle and the proletariat and to attack capitalist nations. Such was the necessary outcome of Soviet Russia's establishment as a polity, the fulfillment of its aspiration towards domination in the fields of literature and art. Witness Maxim Gorky's concluding speech at the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers of 1934: "In what do I see the victory of Bolshevism at this congress of writers? It is that those who were considered to be non-Party, 'vacillators' have genuinely—and I have no doubts as to this—recognized Bolshevism as the sole militant and leading idea in their work..."<sup>7</sup>

Communist Russia's victory in the field of art and literature is tantamount to the destruction of genuine art and literature. As Chen Yuan writes in "The Cultural Education of Soviet Russia,"

Why is that [Russian] art and literature have fallen into an abysmal state in merely thirty years since the revolution? The reason is simple. Although Czarist Russia was politically repressive, writers and artists could still create what they needed and wished to create. They could still write about

what they knew and about life as they wished it to be. They even criticized society. They could still inspire idealism. They could still travel or sojourn abroad whenever they wished. They could still visit and correspond, converse, and debate with writers and artists in other countries. Even as they found fault with the government, they could still write freely. Even as the government was displeased with them, they could still publish their works without disruption. Tolstoy, who lived to his eighties, was a major intellectual authority. The government feared him and dared not offend him. It feared the power of his works but dared not stop their distribution. The Czarist government would not even dream to ask Tolstoy to admit his errors or retract his published opinions. All these freedoms are precisely what the Soviet Russian writer or artist no longer enjoys.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Soviet Russia's control of the arts has become increasingly harsh, its demands increasingly unforgiving. The Soviet magazine *Iskusstvo* (Art) once featured Cézanne as an artist worthy of emulation, but has since denounced "Cézannism," along with modernism, futurism, and abstractionism alike to the extreme as corruptions of art. In an essay in the November/December 1940 issue of *Iskusstvo*, [Peisili?] attacked Marc Chagall and denigrated his works as "things with which to remove table legs." The modernist works of Chagall and other earlier Russian masters like Kandinsky and Malevich were hidden away in the storerooms of Moscow museums. Exhibited in their place were history paintings depicting Lenin's speeches and proletarian struggles, as well as other moralizing propaganda images. Can these be called art? At the time, *Pravda* openly beseeched Russian artists, "If we, people of the Stalinist era, cannot fully represent our heroes, we cannot be forgiven. Still-lifes cannot become a means for artists to avoid issues of the real world." Thus Soviet Russian painters all had to paint portraits of their leader Stalin and his heroic deeds.

Soviet Russia's aesthetic theories have persisted completely unchanged even after Stalin's death in 1952 and the subsequent reevaluation of his legacy. This is abundantly clear in Nikita Khrushchev's speech ["Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 20th Party Congress"] at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Russia in February, 1956:

[O]ur literature and art still lag behind life, behind Soviet reality, for these are immeasurably richer than their reflection in art and literature. It is legitimate to ask: have not some of our writers and art workers been losing contact with life? ... We cannot reconcile ourselves to pallid works bearing the stamp of haste, as some comrades in art organizations, editorial offices, and publishing houses are doing. Mediocrity and insincerity are often not given a sufficient rebuff, and this is detrimental to the development of art and the artistic education of the people.... The Party has combated and will continue to combat untruthful depictions of Soviet reality, both attempts to varnish it and attempts to scoff at and discredit what has been won by the Soviet people. Creative work in literature and art must be permeated with the spirit of struggle for communism, it must instill buoyancy and firm conviction in people's hearts and minds, cultivate a socialist mentality and a comradely sense of duty.<sup>9</sup>

Khrushchev's language closely echoes Lenin's "Literature must become party literature" and "Down with non-partisan writers! Down with literary supermen!" In Soviet Russia, literature and art remain enslaved to politics, and writers and artists must obey the Party completely and become an instrument of its world conquest. These policies have been consistent for five decades, and in fact have expanded to every single Communist country. The Chinese Communists are of course no exception.

### 3. The Chinese Communists' Policies on Art

In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

—William Blake, "London"

Let us now consider the Chinese Communists' policies on art. Their entire outlook on art is based on Mao Zedong's May 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art," which, in turn, were based on the ideas of Lenin and Stalin. Mao said,

"Our stand is that of the proletariat and of the masses. For members of the Communist Party, this means keeping to the stand of the Party, keeping to Party spirit and Party policy." "The task of our cultural army is to expose the enemy's atrocities.... To our friends, our allies of various kinds, our attitude should include unity and criticism according to the circumstances." "The audience for literature and art consists of workers, peasants, soldiers, together with their cadres in the army."<sup>10</sup> "Writers and artists must live with workers, peasants, and soldiers in order to understand them." "Writers and artists must first study Marxism-Leninism and Socialism."<sup>11</sup>

In his closing speech, Mao repeated and elaborated on his earlier speech. Here we need not paraphrase him again. Mao's speeches were meant primarily to instruct and provide guiding principles for artists and writers who worked for the Communist Party in the regions under its governance. Mao said,

In the world today, all culture or literature and art belongs to a definite class and part, and has a definite political line. Art for art's sake, art that stands above class and party, and fellow-travelling or politically independent art do not exist in reality. In a society composed of classes and parties, art obeys both class and party and it must naturally obey the political demands of its class and party, and the revolutionary task of a given revolutionary age; any deviation is a deviation from the masses' basic need.... If we agree on the fundamental goal, then our workers in literature and art, our schools for literature and art, our publications, organizations, and activities of every kind in literature and art should serve this goal.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the Communists took over the mainland, Shen Yubing, Guo Moruo, Zhou Yang, and others drafted a set of new cultural policies. Article 45 of the 1949 Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference stipulates that "Literature and art shall be promoted to serve the people, to awaken their political consciousness, and to enhance their enthusiasm for labor."<sup>13</sup> On September 20 of the 43rd year of the Republic [1954], the Communists adopted their so-called Constitution in the First National People's Congress. According to one of its articles, "The People's Republic of China safeguards the freedom of citizens to engage in... literary and artistic creation and other cultural pursuits. The state encourages and assists creative work in... literature, art and other cultural pursuits," but this is a hollow promise and a ruse.<sup>14</sup> Since 1949, the Communists have persisted in the cultural policies laid out in the "Yan'an Talks" and will never deviate from them, as evidenced by the following two episodes:

1. On December 6 of the 40th year of the Republic (1951), the Communist writer He Qifang said at a meeting of the Study Committee of the Literature and Art Field in Beijing,

Comrade Mao Zedong's speech was meant to resolve a series of fundamental issues in the revolutionary movement of China. He opposed petit-bourgeois tendencies within it and provides a clear and comprehensive roadmap and theory for proletarian literature and art.... Comrade Mao Zedong, with his robust command of Marxism and Leninism, penetrated and mastered the basic principles for revolutionary literary and artistic work in China. His speech resolved a series of fundamental questions of the Yan'an literature and art field and of the Chinese revolutionary movement in literature and art, and moreover will necessarily guide our work into the distant future.

2. In May of the 41st year of the Republic (1952), commemorations of tenth anniversary of the "Yan'an Talks" were held throughout the mainland. On this occasion, Guo Moruo, who has reverentially called Stalin as "our everlasting sun, our beloved steel," wrote an encomium of Mao entitled "Let us long be cultural vanguards under the flag of Mao Zedong": "Chairman Mao's call to us from ten years ago continues to ring loud and true today, and will always ring loud and true in the future."

The Communists' so-called literature and art "in service of the people" in fact serve their Party, its political goals, and ultimately its ambition to conquer the world. Thus Gino Severini writes in his "Marxism and Art," "I cannot understand how the Marxist theorists fail to realize how offensive and humiliating their desire to fabricate an art for the people must be for the people themselves. It is as if one said to them: 'Dear people, you are too ignorant and too ingenuous to have authentic un-watered-down art. Now we shall make for you art that you can understand, without thorns or nails or teeth.'<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Among the ancients, those proficient in writing did not seek recommendation for office, and those proficient in painting did not seek appreciation and patronage. I say: I write to express my heart, and I paint to suit my feeling. Simple in my dress and frugal in my meals, I refuse to pander to others. Even princes and ministers cannot command me, knowing I can neither be honored nor shamed. The way of brush and ink cannot be mastered by one without the Dao.

—Mojing Daoren [ink painter Wu Li, 1632–1718]

Once we understand the aesthetic theories and cultural policies of the Soviet Russian and Chinese Communists, the absurdity of putting a “red hat” on modern art becomes self-evident. The Soviets not only detested modern abstract painting, but also strenuously opposed Impressionism and all forms of “Nonconformist art.” They even forbade landscapes, still-lifes, and portraits of citizens in everyday life [i.e. not engaged explicitly in class struggle]. They placed all works of art not sanctioned by the Party into the category of “formalism,” whose purported ringleader was Picasso and whose epicenter was Paris. Painters of the Communist world are all cautioned to reject the influences of Picasso, Matisse, and Cubism.

Lastly, I respectfully submit to all those who wish to put a “red hat” on modern art: do not let your own ignorance become a weapon in the Soviet Communists’ cultural warfare. Around the world, the enemy is promoting its “new socialist realism” to combat the abstractionism of “liberalism.” This fact is detailed already in Fifth Moon artist Li Fangzhi’s [Li Fang, b. 1933] missive from Paris, published in *United Daily News (Lianhe bao)* on August 7 of this year. Our nation now stands at the forefront of a global war against Communism and its cultural ideology. There is an urgent need to support modern art, which is anti-Communist in its very nature because it is incompatible with autocracy. It requires no further explanation that to devote oneself to art is to devote oneself to this war against Communism: all forms of free creativity and individual expression are anti-Communist. Let artists be artists. Stop attacking and trying to destroy them with means and powers beyond art. Artists can contribute more to a free, anti-Communist society than engineers and merchants. And art itself only thrives the more freedom it is given.

(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

This article was previously published in Chinese as “Xiandai yishu yu fei E de wenyi lilun,” *Wenxing* 48 (October 1961): 30–32.

#### Notes

- 1 [Michel de Montaigne, trans. M.A. Screech, *The Complete Essays* (London: Penguin, 2003), 174.]
- 2 [V.I. Lenin, “Party Organization and Party Literature,” *Novaya Zhizn*, no. 12, November 13, 1905, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm>]
- 3 [“On the Policy of the Party in the Sphere of Artistic Literature,” *Pravda*, July 1, 1925, accessed November 20, 2021, <http://www.sovlit.net/decreejuly1925/>]
- 4 [Ibid.]
- 5 [Ibid.]
- 6 [Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), “Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations” (April 23, 1932), accessed November 20, 2021, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1934-2/writers-congress/writers-congress-texts/reconstruction-of-literary-and-artistic-organizations/>]
- 7 [Sergei Alekseevich Fedukin, trans. Sinclair Loutit, *The Great October Revolution and the Intelligentsia* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 224.]
- 8 [Liu gives the Chinese title of this essay as “Su-E de wenhua jiaoyu.”]
- 9 [Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, *The Communist Conspiracy: Strategy and Tactics of World Communism*, Volume 1, Parts 1–2 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1956), “Foreword,” XXXVI.]
- 10 [Translation from Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980), 59–60.]
- 11 [The last two lines do not appear in Mao’s “Talks.”]
- 12 [Translation from McDougall, 98–9.]
- 13 [Translation from Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo ren min zheng zhi xie shang hui yi*), *Important documents of the first plenary session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1950), 17.]
- 14 [“Constitution of the People’s Republic of China” (1954), accessed December 23, 2021. <http://en.pkulaw.cn/display.aspx?cgid=52993&lib=law>]
- 15 [Gino Severini, “Marxism and Art,” trans. Bernard Wall, in *7 Arts*, ed. Fernando Puma (New York: Permabooks, 1953), 109.]

*Toward  
Mysterious  
Whiteness, 1963*

Ink and color on paper

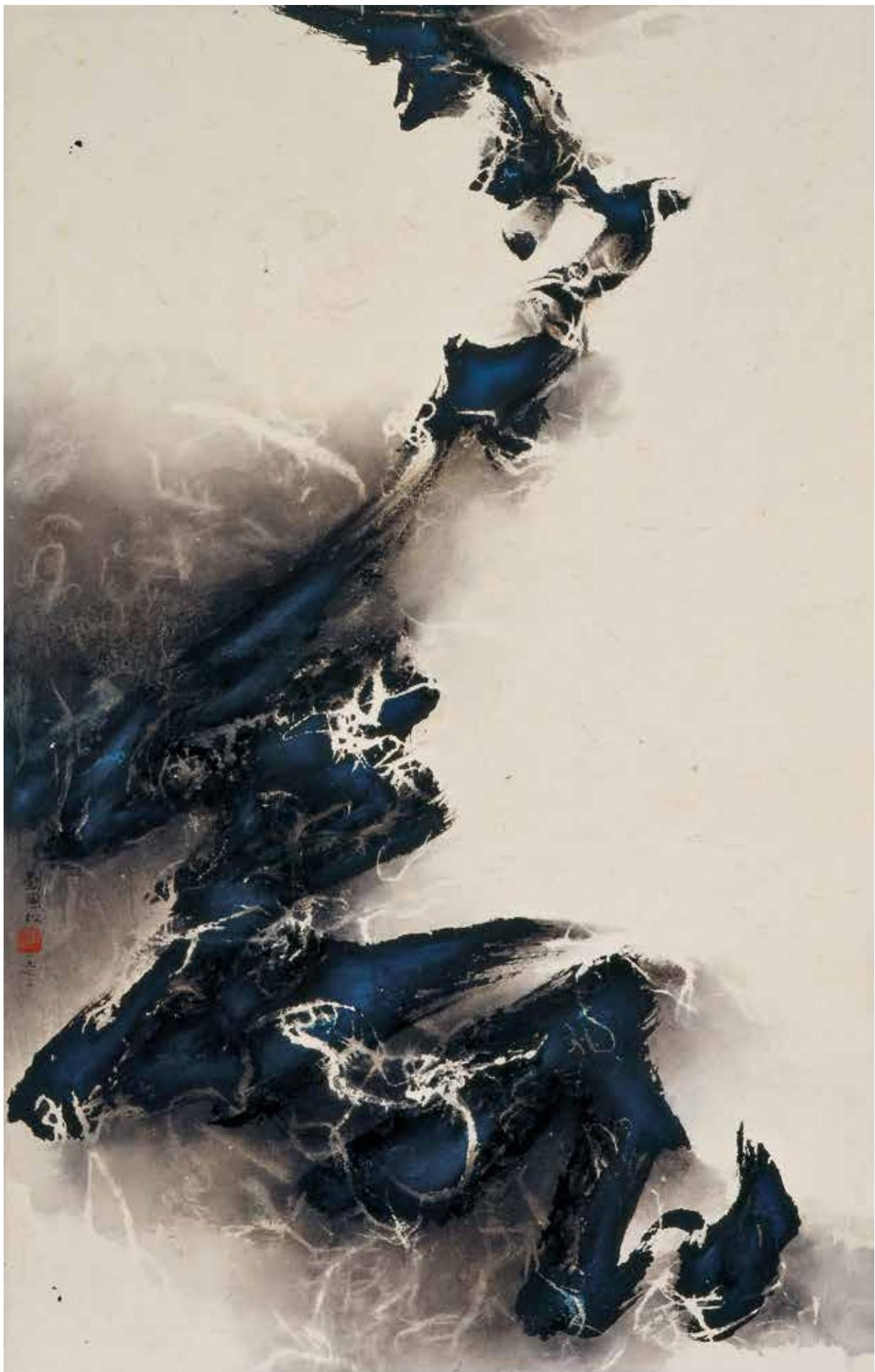
37.01 x 22.83 in

(94 x 58 cm)

Collection of

Johnson Chang

Tsong-Zung



Xu Fuguan  
Liu Kuo-sung

DEBATE ON MODERN ART  
1961

## THE TELOS OF MODERN ART

Xu Fuguan

Where will modern abstract art ultimately go? Modern artists themselves never raise such a question; they furthermore may believe that anyone who raises such a question must be ignorant about art or even wish to destroy art.

1.

In reality, artists are the minority in a population, far outnumbered by viewers of their work. There is often a contradiction between modern artists and their viewers. At an exhibition of modern art, a sincere viewer who does not feign inside knowledge often cannot help asking: "What is the meaning being expressed here?" If this question is posed directly to one of the artists, he or she may respond, politely or impatiently, "To begin with, we never intend to express any particular meaning." The artist's answer is of course sensible. But surely the viewer's query is not wholly senseless—otherwise, why exhibit one's art in public at all? Therefore, the telos of modern art is an issue that deserves serious consideration from the viewer's perspective, whether this pleases modern artists or not.

The future of the world is dependent on many different factors, whose effects mutate as they modulate, neutralize, and combine with each other. Therefore, the future of the world cannot be completely determined by art, let alone by modern art, which is only a particular tendency within art. In the following, when I speak of the influence of modern art on the times, I am only extrapolating the possibilities contained within modern art itself.

2.

The first characteristic of modern art is its drive to destroy the artistic image (*yishu xingxiang*), which is derived from forms existing objectively in nature. What artists refer to as "abstraction" (*chouxiang*) is the removal of all natural forms, aimed at the destruction of the artistic image. As Ernst Cassirer writes in *An Essay on Man*, "The artist is just as much a discoverer of the forms of nature as the scientist is a discoverer of facts or natural laws."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the image is the lifeblood of art. Why do artists wish to destroy it?

Although the artistic image is derived from nature, when concretized in particular works of art it embodies also the artist's emotions and personality. It is thus a union of subject and object. Every image in a work of art is a creation rather than an imitation. But certain prominent artists' subjectivities expand into trends and movements, attracting admirers and followers. The images that they create become clichéd objects of imitation, without the

originality proper to art. The imitator, on the other hand, finds it difficult to invest his or her emotions and personality into a clichéd image, thus losing touch with the creative drive. We must make the following supposition: there is an infinitude of possible images in the universe, and artistic creation is therefore likewise infinite. Artistic creation is the discovery of new images with one's soul and unique sensibilities, and in this process preexisting images are a constraint and an impediment. The modern artistic movement to destroy the artistic image through abstraction may itself be seen as part of a process of discovering unseen images. Artists tasked with this mission are often like Chen Sheng and Wu Guang—peasant heroes leading a revolt, overturning all agendas and regulations. Yet even Liu Bang, after unifying the nation militarily, had to pacify it by tasking Shusun Tong to organize the first court worship and establish a new system of agendas and regulations,<sup>2</sup> the latter reconciling certain preexisting traditions and elements of the new dynasty.<sup>3</sup> By an analogy to this, we may say that a new harmony and unity has emerged in art. Thus, modern artists of the present are none other than peasant heroes on a mission to destroy. Once they have accomplished the destruction, their mission is fulfilled, and they lose the purpose of their existence.

3.

Another characteristic of modern art is its opposition to rationalism, and to the historical traditions and the order of life explicated by and founded upon rationalism. [Modern artists] reject the rule-boundedness of science but are deeply inspired by its discoveries. What they wholeheartedly oppose are the moral sense inherent in human nature and the humanistic way of life. When they delve into the human psyche, they retrieve from it the murky and amorphous subconscious, which they seek to present as it is, untampered by reason. They believe reason to be disingenuous. They do not acknowledge the existence of reason within human nature, do not acknowledge the value systems of tradition and reality, and seek to overturn them all. This is what they call Surrealism. From this perspective, it shares certain attributes of the Communist Party's materialism. But the Communist Party must acknowledge at least some objective laws and must furthermore project an optimistic future. For modern artists, by contrast, there is nothing but dark amorphousness. Denying not only the past but also the future, they take as their own objective the negation of all objectives. However, humanity must ultimately face the future in terms of objectives. We may sometimes reject tradition and the present, but we cannot but demand a sensible future for ourselves. We cannot dwell forever in dark amorphousness. Therefore, if the Surrealist artists succeed in their project of destruction, to what place will they lead humanity? Ultimately, they have no choice but to forge a path for the Communist world.

Over the past several years, I have observed the ebb and flow in the power struggle between the Free World and the Communist World. I have found that the ideology of the Free World is morphing from hopelessness, pessimism, and superficiality towards a self-forsaking, nihilistic hooliganism. We may oppose the Communist Party, but we cannot deny its leadership in the Space Race. The Free World is now behind the Communist World several times more in its ideology than in the Space Race. The Space Race aside, to keep the Free World from falling further behind, it behooves us to reflect more deeply on our culture and on its ideological foundation.

## WHY CONSIGN MODERN ART TO THE ENEMY? QUESTIONS FOR MR. XU FUGUAN

Liu Kuo-sung

On August 14 [1961], the *Overseas Chinese Daily News* (*Wah Kiu Yat Po*) of Hong Kong published an impressive essay by Mr. Xu Fuguan entitled "The Telos of Modern Art." [...] It was clear to me that Mr. Xu is not only an expert of politics, literature, and history, but also well-versed in modern art. Being but a young student, I could not understand many parts of the essay and wish to seek the author's instruction on several questions.

1. My first question concerns the statement, printed in extra-size bold font before the essay proper: "Where will modern abstract art ultimately go? Modern artists themselves never raise such a question." Based on what did Mr. Xu come to such a definite conclusion? I am myself an artist engaged in the research and practice of abstract art, and my experience and knowledge lead me to the opposite opinion. Our nation has a long and rich cultural history, and yet hardly any of the history books that we study in school touches upon it, focusing instead on political history. If we expand our view to encompass the history of art and culture (whether Chinese or Western), we will recognize one fact clearly: in literature as in art, the emergence of a new theory or school is always occasioned by a certain group of writers or artists tirelessly asking themselves "such a question": where will literature and art go? (Modern abstract art is of course no exception.) If Mr. Xu is indeed correct that [in art and literature] rules are uncritically followed and reaffirmed, then there can never have been new ideas or artistic movements (such as Abstract Expressionism, Spatialism, Tachism, Lyrical Abstraction, and Non-Plasticism). Thus I believe that the question of where modern abstract art will ultimately go can only be answered by modern artists themselves, and that anyone else's attempt to address it is completely meaningless. I wonder what Mr. Xu thinks about this.

2. In the second paragraph of his essay, Mr. Xu quotes from Ernst Cassirer: "The artist is just as much a discoverer of the forms of nature as the scientist is a discoverer of facts or natural laws." Mr. Xu continues, "Therefore, the image is the lifeblood of art. Why do artists wish to destroy it?" Is Mr. Xu here expressing his own views on art? If so, then he must subscribe to the theory of art as representation of nature. Yet, he goes on to concede, "[a] lthough the artistic image is derived from nature, it in fact embodies the artist's emotions and personality in particular works of art. It is thus a union of subject and object. Every image in a work of art is a creation rather than an imitation." Here Mr. Xu rejects the

notion of art as representation of nature, creating a self-contradiction that prevents him from arriving at a consistent and unified view on art. When he refers to the "creation" of the "union of subject and object," does he mean that the artist does not simply "imitate" the form of an object but rather artfully distorts and exaggerates it? If so, then has Mr. Xu not answered his own question about why abstract artists must "destroy" figurative form? For to distort or exaggerate a form is necessarily also to destroy it to an extent.

Citing political history, Mr. Xu compares modern artists to Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, and abstract art's "destruction" of figurative form to the overturning of all conventions and regulations in a peasant revolution: "Thus, modern artists of the present are none other than peasant heroes on a mission to destroy. Once they have accomplished the destruction, their mission is fulfilled, and they lose the purpose of their existence." If here Mr. Xu has in mind the Dadaists, then he is certainly right. But since he specifies "modern artists of the present," I have reason to believe that he is referring to abstract artists. In that case, his comparisons are problematic. Let us review the history of Western art of this century. After the mass slaughter in Europe in the First World War, a group of artists began to question the supposed supremacy of Western civilization and launched a movement aimed at overturning it completely: Dadaism. Soon thereafter, however, certain Dadaists realized that sheer overturning was unproductive and launched the Surrealist movement, forging a new art upon the ruins of destruction. Figurative form having been destroyed in Dadaism, Surrealist and abstract artists who came afterwards pursued new forms in its wake, creating a human-centric and personal world of art distinct from God-created nature. Is it not obvious that modern abstract artists today remain preoccupied with creating images recognizably their own?

For me, it is very comical to compare victor's justice in political struggles with the dialectics of old and new ideas in art.

3. Mr. Xu writes in his last paragraph, "What they [modern artists] wholeheartedly oppose is the moral sense inherent in human nature, and the humanistic way of life.... [They] do not acknowledge the value systems of tradition and reality, and seek to overturn them all. This is what they call Surrealism. From this perspective, it shares certain attributes of the Communist Party's materialism." He concludes this essay thus: "If the Surrealist artists succeed in their project of destruction, to what place will they lead humanity? Ultimately, they have no choice but to forge a path for the Communist world." This is a terrifying conjecture and conclusion. I cannot begin to understand how someone as erudite, worldly, and steeped with political history as Mr. Xu Fuguan could arrive at this judgment in such a cavalier manner. This is both lamentable and puzzling.

I do not know why Mr. Xu believes Surrealism to be contrary to human moral sense and the humanistic way of life. Moral standards vary across times and cultures. In traditional China, young widows were expected to maintain their chastity for life, whereas men could have multiple wives. Such injustice was considered in accordance with "moral sense" and a matter of course. But today we regard it as immoral and contrary to human nature. In Europe and the United States, lovers feel free to embrace and kiss in public, whereas here such behavior is considered morally corrupting and prosecuted by the police. What exactly are the moral sense and the humanistic way of life to which Mr. Xu appeals?

I have no problem with Mr. Xu's argument that Surrealism is anti-traditional. Almost without exception, every -ism begins by proclaiming its opposition to tradition. But how can we align this time-worn pattern of artistic movements with Communism? Forgive me for aping Mr. Xu's language in asking, "Do you have any idea how many people you are consigning to Communism?" Is Mr. Xu's alignment of modern art with the Communist Party based on nothing but the Party's destruction of tradition and overturning of the old? If so, then he has committed a major error, since Communist Parties are in fact diehard traditionalists when it comes to art. In the opening to his "Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature," Mao Zedong said, "Our meeting today is to ensure that literature and art become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy, and help the people achieve solidarity in their struggle against the enemy."<sup>4</sup> Is Surrealist and modern art easily understandable for ordinary people? Can it "unite and educate the people" and "attack and annihilate the enemy"? If even Impressionism is a "contraband with anti-Socialist ideology," how can a modern painting of pure individualism and idealism have anything to do with the Communist Party's materialist ideology? And how can it possibly "forge a path for the Communist world"? This is truly puzzling.

When it comes to politics, Communism, and materialism, Mr. Xu Fuguan is an authority, whereas I am completely ignorant. I do not know whether he has other reasons for conflating modern art and Communism. I can only describe the reality that I see with my own eyes. The Communist Party produces only political propaganda and no true art, let alone modern art. Art does not conform to its materialist ideology. Hsiao Chin makes this clear in his "Review of the 30th Venice Biennale" (published in issue 35 of *Wenxing*): "The Soviet Russian Pavilion is the worst part of the entire exhibition, pitiable and laughable. It has nothing to do with art. Those poor 'artists' are no more than slaves exploited for political propaganda. [The Pavilion] displays even propaganda posters made for political purposes or for war—utterly shameless. In this Pavilion, we can see how true Communist rule extinguishes the human spirit completely, assimilating all human thought and action into material changes. Humanity becomes only a cog in the machine of nation and country. From this we can also imagine the state of art in mainland China." That no modern artist exists in the Communist world is an undeniable fact.

Everyone is entitled to his or her artistic taste, but putting a "red hat" on art that one happens to dislike is unacceptable—this is unethical behavior. It is very regrettable that modern painting, which is only in its infancy in our nation, has given Mr. Xu (and perhaps many others) such a wrong impression. I wish to conclude my essay with a quotation from Mr. Xu's own "On the Cultural Thought of China of the Past Thirty Years": "Every person with a conscience finds it difficult to maintain his or her principles. Intellectual independence is constantly under the interference of political power, which exploits every possible means and every excuse to suffuse cultural thought and whose corruptive and distorting effects are all-encompassing. This indeed is the immense catastrophe faced by cultural thought."

## THE TELOS OF MODERN ART A RESPONSE TO MR. LIU KUO-SUNG Xu Fuguan

After reading my essay, "The Telos of Modern Art," in *Overseas Chinese Daily News*, Mr. Liu Kuo-sung published some critical opinions about it in the August 29 and 30 issues of *United Daily News* under the heading, "Why Consign Modern Art to the Enemy?" This was a positive event, and I am very grateful for it.

Before responding to him, let me first take the opportunity to explain why I wrote the original piece despite my lack of expertise on the subject. When my own wife and daughter asked me the same question, I could only laugh.

I have long wanted to consider Chinese culture in the context of world culture. The most important preparation that I made for my course on *The Literary Heart and the Carving of Dragons* at Tunghai University was to copy some 300,000 characters worth of Western literary theory and criticism. But this work was only for my lectures. I must admit that I remain far from an expert on the subject.

During my sojourn in Tokyo last year, the first thing I did was to visit the bookstores in Kanda to see for myself the myriad Japanese translations of works on contemporary thought. As someone who cannot read English, I have no access to them in Taiwan. So [in Tokyo] I suspended the research I had originally planned and did my best to collect and read this material, which of course included publications on art and literature, in order to rekindle my interest in contemporary culture. After a while, this material inspired in me, as an intellectual worker, to think broadly about the future of humanity. My first attempt at modern art criticism was "Symbols of Destruction," a dispatch that I wrote in response to an exhibition in Kyoto. Mr. Tang Junyi told me it was not bad, but I did not continue writing in that vein. This year, I have been allocating time every week to read new publications on modern thought and culture and, instead of simply copying them as I did before, writing a short review of each. This way I can eke out a meager salary while enriching my knowledge. I have often thought that an intellectual today carries a tremendous psychological burden. But I am a little obsessive: once a worthwhile idea enters my mind, I need to reflect on it constantly, even when walking or eating. Although this work is outside my formal professional responsibilities, I hope to continue it for another year or two. However, knowing that my writing is of lackluster quality, I dare not sell it in Taipei and resort to the Hong Kong market.

When it comes to modern art, Mr. Liu and I differ in that he is a specialist—like the head chef of a famous restaurant—whereas I only attempt to understand and synthesize the conclusions of other experts—like a diner ordering dishes from a menu. So I am indeed a mere amateur, and this is just as well. Below, I address Mr. Liu's questions one by one.

First, when I write that modern abstract artists never raise the question of "Where will modern art ultimately go?", I am referring to a matter of foundational intellectual outlook. The question is one of rational inference, whereas Surrealism and Abstractionism are thoroughly opposed to rationality and reason. In spirit, abstract artists are nihilists in Nietzsche's sense, denying the validity of even the question of "why." Duchamp said, "Never consider art, and never consider construction."<sup>5</sup> Other similar articulations by

modern artists abound. Given this, how can we expect them to be concerned with art's eventual destination? In its very essence, modern art is a movement to liberate the deep unconscious—it is "pure automatism." (On the above, see He Fangtan's *Poetry and the Surrealist Movement*.) Modern artists believe all theory to be false and opposed to art. The question that we pose to them about the "why" of their work is, from their perspective, completely meaningless and irrelevant. We can sense this sentiment even in Mr. Liu's own essay. Thus, when I write that [modern artists regard] "anyone who raises such a question must be ignorant about art or even wish to destroy art," I am simply inferring a logical result of their fundamental character. On this point, I can say to Mr. Liu with all honesty that I have never doubted myself. As for Mr. Liu's "experience and knowledge that lead me to the opposite opinion," I have no view on it.

Mr. Liu writes, "the question of where modern abstract art will ultimately go can only be answered by modern artists themselves, and that anyone else's attempt to address it is completely meaningless. I wonder what Mr. Xu thinks about this." I believe that this statement has some validity when considered from his standpoint. Generally speaking, however, art and literary criticism often strikes an artist or author as irrelevant, but this does not negate the critic's function. My short essay treats modern art as an important "cultural phenomenon" and reflects on it as such. The object of my reflections is the fate of humanity. Whether art itself serves a purpose or not is not something decidable by a single person, but a cultural critic does not give up his intellectual work because of this. [Wladimir] Weidlé and [Bi-ka-er-te?], for example, have mounted wholesale attacks on abstract art (a Japanese translation exists for Weidlé's *The Dilemmas of the Arts*). Last year, a Japanese poet and critic visited Herman Hesse, the winner of the 1946 Nobel Prize for Literature, in Switzerland. In their conversation, Hesse expressed admiration for Chinese poetry. When he learned of abstract art's popularity in Japan, he responded with agitation: "What a shame! Whether in poetry or art, a work without an object is hollow! [Painting becomes an exercise of] adding some color here and some color there. This turning away from nature is truly lamentable" (see the June 18th issue of the *Asahi Shimbun*). For a critical thinker, no authority is beyond challenge. This I have always believed, although I may not always be able to put it into practice. Moreover, since abstract artists deny everything outside their solitary existences, how can they properly oppose criticisms of themselves by others?

I write that "the image is the lifeblood of art," that the artistic image is "creation" that unifies "subject and object." I also question why abstract art seeks to eradicate the image. These are hardly controversial positions, and I do not understand why Mr. Liu finds them "self-contradictory." The images manifested in art are indeed always unions of subject and object, even when the artist considers himself or herself scientifically-minded. There is no contradiction. Ernst Cassirer elucidates this point very well in the chapter on "Art" in his *An Essay on Man*, and there is no need to dwell on it here anymore. What abstract art aspires towards is not creation that unifies subject and object, but rather creation by subject without regard to object. The work of an abstract artist is "founded upon the resolve of the solitary self. This resolve not only severs the ties between the artist and the various conditions of his or her life, but does not spare even the conditions surrounding the act of artistic creation itself. Every object confronted by the artist is to be willfully rejected." "After Cubism, the reality of the external visual world has been pulverized into dust." (See Sōichi Tominaga's

*Modern Art*.) From the standpoint of traditional art, which unifies subject and object, I am skeptical about abstract art as an art of subject without object. This does not strike me as contradictory.

As for my comparing abstract art's historical mission to Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, this is merely an analogy. I mean to suggest that abstract art's negation and destruction of everything at present is to forge a path for a new kind of art. This has historical significance. But whatever the new art to come, it will not simply remain abstraction. This is my personal view on the telos of art considered in art's own terms. Of course, my view will not please the abstract artists. In any case, there is no suggestion of "victor's justice" in my analogy. In the history of politics, society, and culture, destruction is frequently followed by reconstruction. I see nothing "very comical" about this. In his essay on the 20th century, Tetsuzō Tanikawa writes, "It (abstract art) clearly makes one think of it as a sign of the desolation of a civilization in decline. But the ending of one thing frequently implies the beginning of another. Here one may envision, distantly in the future, a healthier kind of art." Even within the art world, many people believe that "abstract painting has run its course. The second half of the 20th century should be a time when abstract painting is replaced by figurative painting in turn." (See "The Frontiers of Painting Overseas" in the August 7th, 1961 issue of *Asahi Shimbun*). While Mr. Liu may not agree with my opinion, it is neither baseless or purely idiosyncratic.

From the standpoint of politics and society, I regard Surrealist and abstract art as having "no choice but to forge a path for the Communist world." That this sentence was the true impetus behind Mr. Liu's essay is evident from its title, "Why Consign Modern Art to the Enemy?" I must first clarify some issues of semantics. When I say that modern art forges a path for the Communist world, I do not mean to consign modern art to the enemy. To say ignorant and selfish individuals create an opening for the Communist Party is not the same as handing them over to it, much less putting "red hats" on them—something I do not believe I have ever done. Therefore Mr. Liu should probably revise his title. Strictly speaking, his misunderstanding of my words has nothing to do with my essay itself, and I should not pay it no heed. But many people, when they hear that someone has a new opinion, believe it to be valid without asking why. In order to invite reflection by thoughtful individuals, I will say a few more words below.

From an abstract artist's standpoint, whether he or she forges a path for someone or something else should not be a question. Faced with a claim that he or she has forged a path, an artist needs only to dismiss it with a laugh. When Mr. Liu takes issue with me on this question, he does so not from the standpoint of a practitioner of abstract art, but rather from that of an objective observer. Being immersed in the process of artistic creation implies a different state of mind than putting down the brush and critically evaluating one's painting. Between painting and essay, Mr. Liu has in fact transitioned between the two states of mind. I hope that he will similarly attempt to adopt the standpoint of politics, society, and culture when considering the above question.

In response to the mechanistic art of modernity, "there arose an art of discomfort, of crisis, of fracture. From Dada to Surrealism (Surrealism and Abstractionism are two lineages issuing from the same spirit and character; they interpenetrate), modern art, as well as all the things in its orbit that is attracted to and repelled by it, are clearly founded upon the social psychology of 'the fall of Western Europe.'" "If we regard [modern art] as one manifestation of the Capitalist system's gradual dissolution, then it is not surprising that

we can identify its followers even outside Western Europe." (See the previously cited "Art of the 20th Century" [by Tanikawa]). This is a hardly an uncommon view. Mr. Liu claims that abstraction is anti-tradition (although some say it continues traditions of the Neolithic period) and that the Communist Party's art is traditional. His claim is partly right, and I have no desire to quibble with it. But abstract art is not only anti-tradition but also anti-society, anti-everything. Abstract artists "reject all intellectual activity" and "regard all order as a spiritual constraint and something that must be destroyed. They must first rid themselves of the organizing pattern of human rationality." They "reject all received concepts and values." They "aim to become the loss of center, the disintegration of unity, the dissolution of order" and "adopt the central posture of rebellion in relation to everything." "Modern art is doubtlessly a negation. It announces 'no' to the five centuries of intellectual development since the Renaissance. It turns all concepts and values into 'nothingness.' 'God is dead.'" "With gnashing teeth modern art consumes all supposedly immovable classical values. Nihilism is its flesh. It derives its strength from the rebellious and destructive power unique to nihilism." (See the previously cited *Modern Art* [by Tominaga] for the above quotations.) Modern art is a dark, chaotic force that negates rationality and issues from a deeply submerged consciousness. It expresses itself as a

determined break and as an irresistible command. If we regard modern art from the perspective of society and politics as opposed to that of art, we may ask: towards what destination will this force ultimately charge? In the great contest between the two camps, the Free World has surrendered its entire intellectual weaponry to abstract art. Whom or what will benefit from this? After Charles de Gaulle became President of France, he did not make Communism illegal, but instead forced into exile the existentialist philosopher Sartre (existentialism and modern art share the same intellectual roots). This was a tremendous tragedy in the intellectual arena of the Free World and deserves our careful consideration. I hope my words will not lead to further misunderstanding. Lastly, as an ignorant outsider to art daring to write about art, I have doubtlessly committed many errors, for which I ask for Mr. Liu's forgiveness.

August 30th, 1961, Tunghai University

(Translations by Alan C. Yeung)

Xu's original essay was published in *Overseas Chinese Daily News (Wah Kiu Yat Po)* (Hong Kong), August 14, 1961. Liu's response was published in two parts in *United Daily News (Lianhe bao)* (Taiwan), August 29 and 30, 1961. Xu's response to Liu was published in two parts in *United Daily News*, September 2 and 3, 1961.

## Notes

- 1 [Translation from Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1944), 148.]
- 2 [Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were leaders of an uprising against the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) in 209 BCE.]
- 3 [Liu Bang (d. 195 BCE) was the founding emperor of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).]
- 4 [Translation from Bonnie S. McDougall (ed. and trans.), *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art"* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, 1980), 75.]
- 5 [The editors were unable to source this quotation.]

Liu Kuo-sung

## TIME FOR HONG XIFANG TO KNOCK IT OFF!

1962

**YESTERDAY I RAN INTO** an old friend of mine on the street, who was just coming back from a troop rally; he's also an old classmate, though he only studied classical literature. We get along quite well, but the problem is that whenever we start a conversation, we've hardly begun to talk before we start arguing; the reason is that he just can't stand looking at abstract art (and to be honest, except for Chinese paintings of beautiful ladies and flowers, or Western landscapes that look more like advertisements, he has no tolerance for any kind of painting whatsoever). Because I love talking about abstract art, I take every opportunity to try and convince him, hoping that finally I'll get him to cast off his stubborn prejudice and just calmly appreciate it. When he saw me this time, he didn't say a single word of greeting, but just looked at me smugly and said:

When I was at the base today I came across the latest issue of *New Literature and Art* magazine (*Xin wenyi zazhi*), with an article by someone called Hong Xifang. It was great, you have to read it; in fact you absolutely can't fail to read it!

I asked him what the article was called and what it was about, but all he would say is: "Go get a copy and then you'll find out." But judging from his expression and tone of voice, I already had a pretty good idea.

I went to quite a few bookshops and newsstands but was unable to buy this *New Literature and Art* magazine anywhere. Finally a vendor suggested that I should try asking at New China Publishers (*Xin Zhongguo chubanshe*), and I ended up finding a copy there. It turns out it's a monthly journal distributed by the military, not for retail, but I ran into someone I knew and they gave me a copy.

It turned out to be just as I thought; the title of the article by this Hong Xifang was "Picasso's Disciples Should Knock It Off!" It was only about 800 words long, but after reading it through I found it both laughable and infuriating. Laughable because here was a person clearly ignorant about art, who blithely went on as though he knew what he was talking about while making the most ridiculous assertions. Infuriating because this person wanted to reject anyone who was different from himself, and used the most contemptible means to discredit any young painter who was angry, idealistic, critical, and had a true sense of responsibility; and this was completely intolerable.

Abstract art has suffered criticism and reproof, which is the same kind of treatment meted out in the past to any emerging new art group: it's not an unusual phenomenon. Yet, it may only be in China where people actively plot to use the most despicable means to attack abstract art, especially the accusation of "red hat," to destroy any and all abstract artists.<sup>2</sup> The first emergence and manipulation of the red hat strategy to damage abstract artists was in 1961, during the *Modern Art Exhibition* organized by

the National Museum of History as part of the Arts Festival (this is where an abstract print by Chin Sung was criticized as containing subversive ideas, and from that day to this his work has been secreted away at that museum).<sup>3</sup> An account of the entire episode appeared in August 1961 (in an essay written by Liu Shi in the August 1961 issue of *Revolutionary Art* [*Geming yishu*]).<sup>4</sup> At the time, a number of young painter friends had urged me to come forward and make a statement, but I thought that the language and behavior used by those people to slander young artists was just too childish and ridiculous. But then I saw that Mr. Xu Fuguan had written an article in the August 14th edition of *Overseas Chinese Daily News* (Wah Kiu Yat Po; Huaqiao ribao) in which he used a similar argument, and this was a new level of misconception that simply could not be ignored. Mr. Xu has read more books than Liu Shi, and his essays are more elegantly written, so in order to nip this kind of fallacy in the bud, I had no choice but to take him on as my adversary and to refute all these kinds of mistaken arguments (see the August 29 and 30, and September 6 and 7, 1961 editions of *United Daily News* and April 1, 1962 edition of *Zuopin* magazine, and the article "Modern Art and Soviet Russian Aesthetics" (*Xiandai yishu yu fei E de wenyi lilun*) in the same publication, volume 8, issue 6).<sup>5</sup> But these were all simply positive arguments, written from a more passive stance, which made an appeal to society for justice, security and freedom of artistic expression.

### 2. Picasso is not an abstract artist

At this time, Hong Xifang (Why doesn't he use his real name? This fear of taking responsibility is not the behavior of a cultivated man) used Picasso's having been awarded the 1961 "Lenin Peace Prize" as an excuse to shoot poison darts at us, stating: "Just at a time when our treasured island of Taiwan is fighting communism, there appear on the scene a small group of Picasso's admirers who are taking up a lot of print by publishing articles touting Picasso's poisonous abstract works; this is truly a development that is both worrisome and regrettable." He then went on to say: "May I advise these makers of abstract paintings, these admirers of Picasso, to wake up. If you don't aspire to be another awardee of the "Lenin Peace Prize," then please make haste and change your tune; don't forget that you are an anti-communist Chinese national; don't forget that you are a Chinese with a long cultural history: stop deceiving and hurting yourself and stop deceiving and hurting others."

First I would like to make the following point: Picasso has never created an abstract painting, nor is he the leader of abstract painting. Mr. Hong Xifang, how then can you possibly link Picasso and abstract painting together? Go right ahead and examine all of Picasso's works: do you see a single abstract painting there? Quite

the opposite, for Picasso is in fact anti-abstract painting. Last year, in last year's June 19th issue of Hong Kong's *New Asia Life Biweekly* (*Xin Ya shenghuo shuang zhoukan*) (vol. 4, no. 1, p. 10), Chen Shiwen, chairman of the Art Department of New Asia Academy, wrote: "One important thing worth noting about Picasso is that he does not acknowledge abstract art." He then offers some direct quotes from Picasso: "There is no abstract art."<sup>6</sup> "Neither is there figurative and non-figurative art. All things appear to us in the shape of forms.... A figure, an object, a circle, are forms."

I've quoted Mr. Chen Shiwen here not to prove that Picasso is an opponent of abstract painting (in fact from his works we easily can see that he has always rejected anything that is not a natural form); Mr. Hong Xifang himself also understands only too well that in bestowing the Peace Prize on Picasso, the Soviet Empire merely wished to exploit Picasso's painting *Dove of Peace*. Now may I ask, is *Dove of Peace* a work of representational art, or is it abstract art? The answer is obvious to anyone, so why does Mr. Hong Xifang wish to pervert the truth? May I advise Mr. Hong Xifang, that next time he wants to argue against a person or a circumstance, he should first do a little research and get his facts straight before laying out his opposing arguments. Because with this kind of ignorant posturing he will not only fail to achieve his objective, but in fact will cause quite the opposite effect.

Since Picasso is a figurative artist, and moreover is opposed to the idea of abstract painting, then on our island of Taiwan, which opposes both Chinese and Soviet communism, are there then any abstract artists who actually take Picasso as their model? If there are any, then it is quite obvious that they must be young artists who have no real clue about abstract painting, and create works that cannot be considered as such!

On the other hand, even if Picasso actually were an abstract painter, and the leading figure of abstract painting at that, what would that have to do with us anyway? We can't "hasten and change our tunes" [and stop painting ink paintings] simply because Qi Baishi is an ink painter and now captive to the communists. Equally, even though the proven communist collaborator Xu Beihong paints horses, it does not follow that Mr. Liang Dingming has to start painting donkeys instead. Or since Liu Haisu served as the director of a communist art academy, does it follow that the Art Department of our Normal University should no longer dare to teach Western painting? Have you not seen the painting catalogues of "for the people" artist Qi Baishi or those of the former director of a communist painting academy, Xu Beihong, which abound in Taipei's mounting shops and can be found in the homes of many an ink painting master who uses them as copy models? And just because both Mr. Liu Shi and his uncle Liu Haisu have used Western techniques in their ink paintings, are you then also advising that Mr. Liu Shi had better wake up? If you want to talk about the relationship between Chinese people and Picasso, then who would serve as a better example than Mr. Zhang Daqian, who in the spring of 1956 visited Picasso at his chateau? Zhang Daqian considered this opportunity to meet with Picasso as a great honor, and photographs showing him posing with Picasso have been published all over the world. Moreover, when he returned to [Taiwan] in early 1959, unlike Hong Xifang, he did not berate Picasso; to the contrary, when he was met at the airport by a welcoming committee of academy directors, ministers, young people and students, journalists such as Yao Fengpan from *United Daily News*, Li Qinglai from *Central Daily News* (*Zhongyang ribao*), Huang Shunhua from *Taiwan Xinsheng bao*, and journalists

from other newspapers and magazines all sang his praises, complimenting his poise and daring, and extolling the achievements of his paintings; will you then pointlessly also warn these people to knock it off?

### 3. The Spanish government's stance towards abstract painting

In his article, Hong Xifang quotes the following passage from Mr. Chen Qingfen's book *Voyages around the World*: "One thing that I found particularly of note, is that in the largest museum in Spain, with the broadest art collection in the country, one can only see a single work by Picasso, dating from his early period. Other countries compete to display the works of this world-famous modern artist, while in his own country, to show his works is not considered an honor, but a humiliation. The reason is that in this Catholic country, worn out by the suffering caused at the hands of the communists, everyone, from the highest to the lowest, is an anti-communist. But Picasso himself is a leftist, and thus the Spanish government is not inclined to be tolerant towards him, despite the fact that he is a genius, and instead rejects the very artist whom the world deems exceptional. In fact this kind of uncompromising, resolute anti-communist stance is China's best friend."<sup>8</sup>

I haven't read Mr. Chen Qingfen's *Voyages around the World*, and so I don't know if he is talking specifically about the period before 1931 when he was a student in Paris; but if he is, then there are two reasons why the Spanish museum would have had so few of Picasso's works at that time. Firstly, he was only beginning to establish his reputation, and so museums were not yet ready to take the chance of confirming his importance; and secondly, being a conservative Catholic country, Spain was not receptive to the kind of distorted forms he was painting at the time (especially his Cubist-style works in which the object was broken down and then reassembled). And if he is not referring to that time period, but rather to a later time, then Picasso's opposition to the dictator Franco was not necessarily the reason either.

Today (more than thirty years after 1931), while I don't have the information on whether or not that particular museum has increased its holdings of Picasso's works, there is plenty of data available attesting that in Spain today, abstract art is the representative style of the painting circles there, and moreover receives the support and encouragement of the government. Let us now take a closer look at the development of the Spanish painting scene. In the first decade of the 20th century, Spanish painting was stuck in a monotonous cycle of academicism, when the artist Diaz created his mural painting *Santa Maria de la Ravidia* in the locale of Vuelva, bringing Cubist-style art into Spain. This trend continued until 1945. After the end of World War II, dedicated young artists, all under thirty years of age, launched a new movement against academicism, taking Surrealism as a starting point and giving a new lease on life to traditional concepts and to the value of tradition itself, and demonstrating an urge towards a naturally expressive lyricism. At this time a flurry of new art groups were established, among the most important of which were Dau Al Set, formed in Barcelona in 1948. In the Catalan dialect, the name Dau Al Set means "the seventh face of the dice," a term originally used by the Surrealists. The key painters of this group included Antoni Tàpies, Joan Joseph Tharrats, Modest Cuixart and Juan Ponc. They also published an eponymous journal of criticism, enthusiastically

promoting new art, which was edited by Tharrats; the critical standard of this publication was on a par with the best of the Surrealist publications. As this new art entered the decade of the 1950s, art critics and foreign gallerists flocked to Barcelona, with the result that their artworks were successively exhibited in Paris, Mexico, South American, Italy, Switzerland, London, New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, in salons and art competitions, and gradually began winning awards.

In 1957, the new art group "El Paso" was formed in Madrid, and included the painters Antonio Saura, Luis Feito, Manolo Millares, and Rafael Canogar, all supporters of Informalist non-figurative art. According to critic J.E. Cirlot, one of the most significant differences between Informalist art and the more narrowly circumscribed scope of representational art is that the former is not restricted to figurative, standard-based concepts, and rejects all nature-based and objective signs. As early as 1952, Tàpies, through connections in the Spanish government, was invited to show his work in the Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. He again was included in 1954, and in 1956 Tharrats, Saura, Feito, Millares, and Canogar also participated, with their work receiving international critical support. Forced to take note of such a positive international reception, Spanish museum officials could no longer afford to be so dismissive [of their work]. Subsequently, this same group of artists was chosen to represent Spain at the 29th Venice Biennale in 1958, demonstrating that they now had the government's full support.

In 1959 the Spanish government organized the exhibition *13 peintres espagnols actuel* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, and at the same time signed a formal agreement for a program of cultural exchange. In his preface to the exhibition catalogue, José Ruiz Morales, Franco's Director General of Cultural Relations, said: "One can see the world in a drop of water, and divine the purpose of life by observing the cracks in a wall." This is the very meaning of the modern art revolution. Spain... one of the oldest cultures in the Western world... in her ambitions towards progress cannot afford to be ignorant of these new directions." Adopting an approving attitude he confirmed: "She has proven her strong character... particularly in the domain of painting, an area in which over centuries she has made outstanding contributions." Clearly by that point abstract [painters] had won a decisive victory in Spain, and at the same time also received major accolades at the 1960 Venice Biennale. Currently, their paintings are featured in touring exhibitions in the United States and Canada.

If, as Mr. Chen Qingfen has stated, Spain is a staunchly anti-communist country from top to bottom, and thus, due to Picasso's left-wing stance, considers it shameful to show his work; and if, as Mr Hong Xifang states, all abstract painters are followers of Picasso, then why would Franco allow abstract art to take root and flourish in Spain itself? If, on the island of Taiwan, abstract painters must all change their tune, then what about Spanish abstract painters? What should they do? I recently read another article by Mr. Chen Qingfen published in the *Central Daily News* (June 18th) titled "There is No Art under Tyranny" (*Baozheng zhi xia meiyu yishu*). In it he states, "Paintings of the contemporary school of Abstraction take as their basis the emotional will which arises directly from the heart, from the most extreme and natural emotional impulses; but communism does not permit the expression of such individual inner emotions. Theirs is a socialist society completely devoid of humanity, ethics, and fraternity, and as such it would be impossible for them to produce pure art there. And I

say that they would be completely incapable of understanding the true essence of pure art."

Mr. Chen Qingfen's statement not only makes it perfectly clear that the Soviet Union is opposed to abstract painting, but also emphasizes that abstract painting is a form of pure art. For an anti-communist Chinese national, it is important to get the facts straight and to clearly understand the goal: what the Soviet Union opposes is the very thing that it fears, and thus, those things which it opposes should be the very things we advocate and embrace. Why is it that Mr. Hong Xifang is unable to follow this logic, but instead ignorantly accepts the poisonous propaganda of the Soviet state, and together with the Russian enemy declares an attack against this pure art that is the expression of a free people?

Not long ago the Soviets invited the extremely figurative American painter Rockwell Kent of the school of New Realism to pay a visit to the Iron Curtain. Why didn't they also invite the great abstract painter Mark Rothko, or the late Franz Kline? At this point I would like to quote Mr. Hong Xifang's own words and say to him: If you don't want to be invited by the Soviet enemy to pay a visit to the Iron Curtain, then you had better make haste and change your tune; don't forget that you are an anti-communist Chinese national. Mr. Hong Xifang, do you have any idea what you're doing? Think it over! Time to knock it off!

(Translation by Valerie C. Doran)

This article was previously published in Chinese as "Hong Xifang keyi xiuyu!" *Wenxing (Apollo)* 57 (July 1962): 76-79.

## Notes

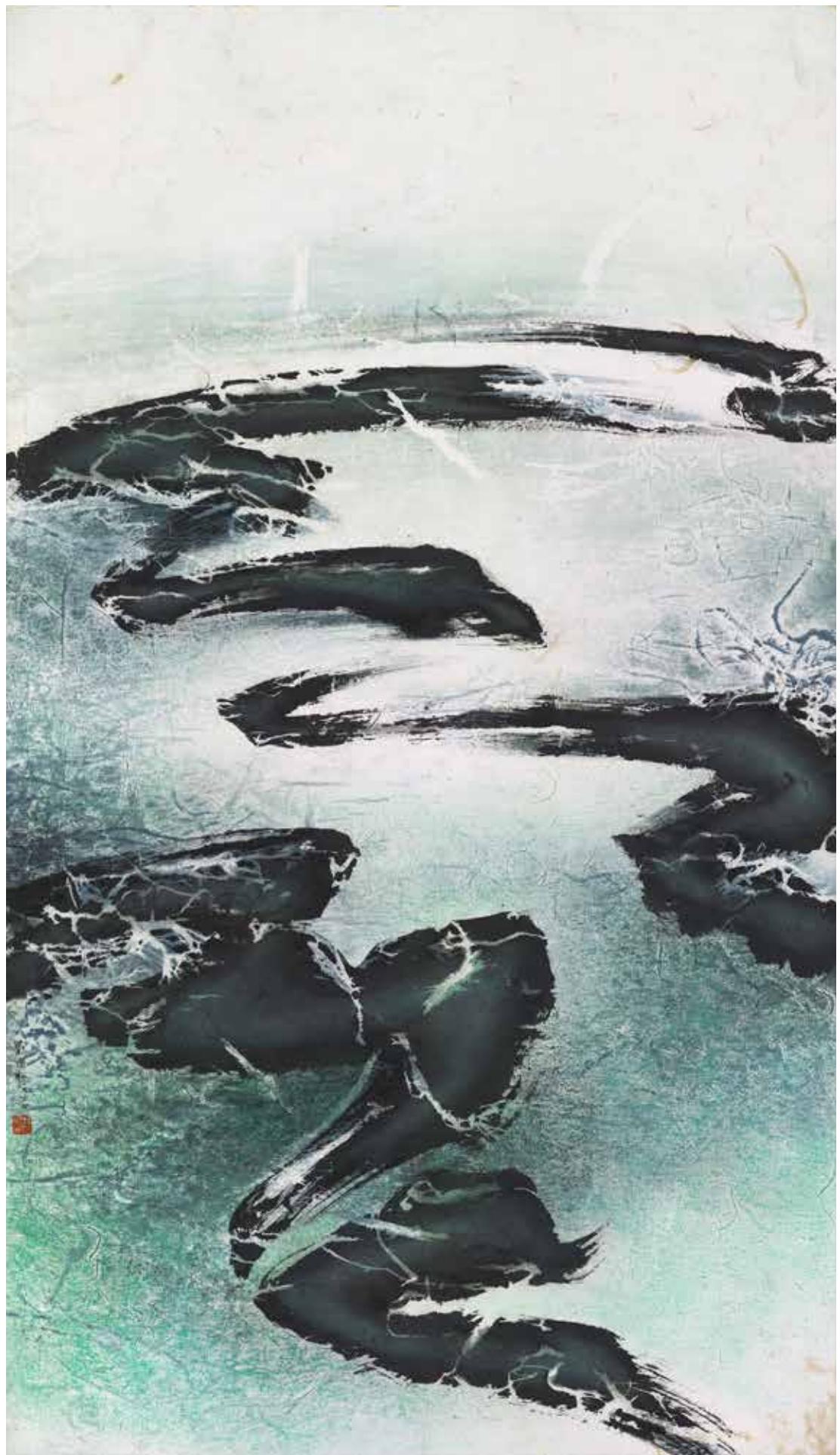
- 1 [Bijiasuo de xintu keyi xiu yi!]
- 2 [In this context, to call someone a "red hat" (*hong maozi*) is to accuse him or her of being a Communist or Communist sympathizer.]
- 3 [Chin Sung (Qin Song, 1932–2007), painter and member of the Ton Fan Group (*Dongfang huahui*), also known as the Eastern Painting Association. His work *Spring Lantern* was attacked by conservatives as having subversive imagery in which the characters for Chiang Kai-shek's name appeared to be written upside down. As a result of these accusations, the work was removed and the Modern Art Exhibition subsequently was not allowed to take place.]
- 4 [Liu Shi (1910–1997) was an ink painter and a nephew of the influential reformist artist Liu Haisu.]
- 5 [This essay is translated in this *Reader*, 20-23.]
- 6 [Picasso's original statement: "There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark." See A.H. Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art* (London: Secker and Walberg, 1975), 273.]
- 7 [Picasso's full quotation: "Neither is there figurative and non-figurative art. All things appear to us in the shape of forms. Even in metaphysics ideas are expressed by forms. Well then, think how absurd it would be to think of painting without the imagery of forms. A figure, an object, a circle, are forms; they affect us more or less intensely."]
- 8 [Chen Qingfen (1910–1987), Taiwanese painter and memoirist who studied art in France from 1928 to 1931. Liu here cites his book *Voyages around the World (Huanqiu wenjian lu)* (Taipei: Changfeng chuban she, 1956).]

*Rhythmic Flow*, 1964

Ink and color on paper

53.15 × 30.51 in (135 × 77.5 cm)

Collection of Taipei Fine Art Museum



## LIU KUO-SUNG AND THE ART AND LITERARY ENVIRONMENT OF 1950S AND 1960S TAIWAN

2021

**LIU KUO-SUNG IS DOUBTLESS** one of the most important artists in modern Chinese painting. An examination of the cultural environment of Taiwan that nurtured him, and in which he came to maturity as an artist, provides an opportunity to understand how Liu navigated that environment and ultimately emerged as a successful international artist. Our story begins with the period of Liu's life leading up to his arrival in Taiwan (Fig. 1)



FIG. 1 Sixteen-year-old Liu Kuo-sung in a school photo, Hubei, China, 1948.



FIG. 2A Liu Kuo-sung aged 17, after enrolling at the Nanjing Revolutionary Army Orphans' School. Liu gave this photograph to his school friend, Huo Gang, in 1949.  
Image courtesy Huo Gang.

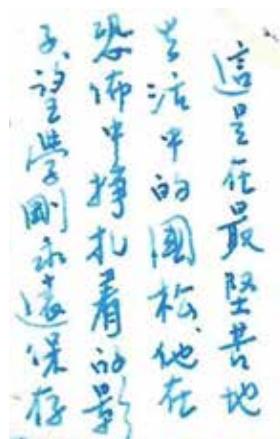


FIG. 2B Inscription in Liu's calligraphy on back side of the photograph, reading: *This is Liu Kuo-sung, a boy living a life filled with bitter hardship. This is his likeness in the midst of terrifying struggles. He asks his schoolmate Gang to keep this always.*

### Sparkling a Passion for Art

The first sparks of Liu's passion for art emerged in 1945. That year he was studying at the junior high school associated with Zhonghua University in Changsha, Hunan province. Each day on the way to school he would pass by two painting mounters' shops. Mr. Zhang, one of the proprietors, noticed that the young Liu took a keen interest in the shop, and learned that he was passionate about painting. He gave Liu his leftover paper and old brushes, and also taught him ink painting. Later on, Mr. Zhang even gave him a book of collotypes of ancient paintings. Since that time, Liu's destiny was deeply connected to art.

In spring of 1948, Liu transferred to the Nanjing Revolutionary Army Orphans' School as a middle school senior. Not only were his grades in art superb, but the school mounted his ink scrolls for display, which boosted his confidence and determined his future as an artist. At the Orphans' School, Liu encountered Huo Gang (Ho Kan, Huo Xuegang) and Li Yuanjia (Li Yuan-chia). Junior to Liu by one year, Huo Gang soon became a close friend (Figs. 2a and 2b). In 1950s Taiwan, Huo Gang and Li Yuanjia would go on to found the Ton Fan Huahui (Eastern Painting Group), and together with Liu's Wuyue Huahui (Fifth Moon Painting Group), they would promote postwar modern art. Yu Tiancong, another fellow student who befriended Liu, later became a famed writer in Taiwan.

After a year at the Orphan's School, Liu was a high school junior. Due to the turmoil of wartime, he returned to Hubei to visit his mother (Figs. 3 and 4). Meanwhile, amid the increasing chaos, his school began the move southward, to distance its students from the battlefield. Liu later rejoined the school in Guangzhou, where it had relocated to an ancestral hall in nearby Xiajiao County, Foshan. The upheaval of the wartime environment was so intense that hardly any formal classes were offered, and due to budgetary burdens and currency devaluation, the school could not afford meat for students' protein requirements, so most meals consisted of cabbage. For students, the good old days of their Nanjing period became a fond memory. In order to obtain sufficient protein, Liu and his classmates hatched a plan to catch fish more easily. They used mud to seal off both ends of an irrigation ditch, then used their tin basins to haul out the water. When the water was shallow enough, the trapped fish would become visible. At that time, the much younger Yu Tiancong's job was to dump the ditch water and give the empty basins back to the more senior students. It was through this kind of bonding exercise that Liu and Yu soon became fast friends.



FIG. 3 Liu Kuo-sung's mother, with Liu and his baby sister, in Wuchang, Hubei Province, 1946.

FIG. 4 Official permit from Nanjing Revolutionary Army Orphans School granting Liu leave to visit his mother during Chinese New Year, spring 1948.



### Arriving in Taiwan

In August 1949, Liu Kuo-sung followed the Orphans' School to Taiwan. Due to extreme budgetary shortages, the government was unable to reestablish the school. Madame Chiang Kai-shek had indicated her hopes that the students would join the military. Some joined the Army Officers' Academy, while those not wishing to join the military were sent to various institutions such as normal, agricultural, or industrial schools. Liu was sent to the Affiliated Senior High School of Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College. Huo Gang was sent to Taipei Normal School, which specialized in training elementary school teachers, and Yu Tiancong enrolled in Chenggong High School. At the Affiliated Senior High School, Liu began to reveal his innate literary talent with "Ge'ermen" ("Brothers"), a modern poem published in *Free China* magazine, and "Aftermath," a short story published in *Zhongxuesheng* (Middle Schoolers') magazine. Having nurtured this literary prowess during high school, the precocious Liu completed his sophomore year and passed the entrance exam to the Fine Arts Department of Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College. From this promising foundation, Liu would emerge as a spokesman for Taiwan's modern art in the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, deftly wielding his sharply critical pen to battle his opponents.

### Provincial Normal Academy and the Art and Literary Environment in Taiwan

Taiwan in the early 1950s was entering a period of postwar recovery. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, Japanese rule on Taiwan ended and the territory was returned to China. The Nationalist Party thus had entered as the new rulers attempting to decolonize and re-Sinicize the island. While all of the art education institutions and systems from the Japanese colonial period continued to function, the Nationalist government also tried to establish new organizations. It was an exceedingly difficult period of adjustment for Taiwanese and mainland cultural elites. In art education, the colonial government had only established several normal schools and one normal academy focused on training teachers to implement elementary through high school curricula, whereas aspiring fine arts students had to go to Japan for study. The colonial-period official exhibitions *Taiten* (Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition), which took place from 1927 to 1936, and *Futen* (Governor-General's Art Exhibition), which took place from 1937 to 1945, were in the postwar period officially rebranded as the "Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition," but the entire classification and jury system continued its erstwhile colonial practices, augmented by the addition of the sculpture department. Art circles in the colonial period had emphasized master-student hierarchical relationships and etiquette, which meant that this practice was continued in the Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibitions, where only students of those masters could garner prizes.

The most contentious subject in the Provincial Art Exhibition was *guohua*, "national painting." Problematizing the situation were the preconceived notions that Taiwanese and émigré mainlanders were developing about each other. Traumatized mainlanders, having just fought an eight-year war of resistance against Japan—losing family members, homes, possessions, education, and livelihoods—naturally harbored a deep-seated hatred of Japan, and many felt insulted that Taiwanese could rationalize regarding *Tōyōga* (i.e., "Eastern style" painting an alternative name for *Nihonga*) as "national painting." With their Sinocentric perspective, mainland artists tried to eradicate the remnants of colonial influence to achieve the goal of de-Japanization and re-Sinicization. Taiwanese elites, by contrast, had experienced first-hand the colonial government's modernization of Taiwan and believed that while Taiwan had advanced into the modern era, the mainland lagged behind. As they witnessed massive numbers of destitute mainland refugees flooding into Taiwan, their superiority complex began to take root. They doubted whether such a backward society would have the ability to govern Taiwan's much more advanced society. Moreover, they believed that the legacy of *Tōyōga*, particularly *plein air* painting, was a sign of modernity. By the time Liu entered the Provincial Normal Academy, his "national painting" professors had already been replaced by the famed mainland painters Huang Junbi and Pu Xinyu. Liu's works from this period demonstrate how he could master the styles of both teachers.

As for Western oil painting and watercolor, Liu Kuo-sung had no previous experience with them due to his poverty and a dearth of resources. His first oil painting teacher was the Taiwanese artist Liao Jichun (Liao Chi-Ch'un), who taught Liu from his sophomore to his senior year. Liu recalled that when he was first given oil paints, he had no clue how to use them. His color-mixing and brushstroke techniques were all learned from Liao Jichun. Because Liao had shown interest in Liu and favored him, Liu began to formulate the idea of total Westernization, and since that time he



FIG. 5. Liu Kuo-sung's teacher and advocate Liao Jichun (center, fourth from left) with Liu and other members of Wuyue Huahui (Fifth Moon Painting Group) at the preview of their "Modern Painting Exhibition" at Taipei's National Museum of History in 1962. This show subsequently travelled to the United States for an exhibition on Long Island, New York.

would focus on oil and watercolor. Though he was highly accomplished in the ink-and-brush techniques of "national painting," he only painted in this style when homework was due. Liao Jichun's support for his student lasted far beyond Liu's Normal Academy years. Not only did he recommend Liu to become the teaching assistant to Prof. Guo Bochuan at Chenggong University's architecture department in Tainan, but he also encouraged Liu and his classmates to establish the Wuyue Huahui (Fifth Moon Painting Group, better known in English simply as Fifth Moon Group) (Fig. 5). Later, when the group came under scrutiny, Liao Jichun and other cultural luminaries stood up to support these young artists.

### Postwar Art and Literary Organizations, Spaces, and Exhibitions

Soon after the Nationalist Party arrived in Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) instructed the party propaganda leader Zhang Daofan to establish the Chinese Art and Literature Association and the Chinese Art and Literature Award Committee. The former included numerous branches such as the Fine Arts Committee, which was reorganized as the Chinese Fine Arts Association the following year. Exhibitions organized by the Chinese Art and Literature Association at the time largely coincided with and promoted Chiang Kai-shek's anti-Chinese communist/anti-Soviet national policies. Between 1951 and 1955, at the peak of its power, the Association was responsible for the Anti-Communist/Anti-Soviet Fine Arts Exhibition, Photography Exhibition in Remembrance of the Mainland, Photography Exhibition of Free China, Art Exhibition in Celebration of Chiang Kai-shek's Birthday, Mobilization Art Exhibition, Photography Exhibition of Mountains and Rivers of the Motherland, and National Spirit Education Art Exhibition. These exhibitions differed from the annual Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition, which was reinstated in 1946, and the annual Tai-Yang Art Exhibition, which had been established by the Tai-Yang Art Association during the colonial period and became a main source for reconstructing the postwar art sphere. Chen Yi, the Nationalist-appointed governor of Taiwan at the time, relied on Yang Sanlang and Guo Xuehu, key members of the Tai-Yang Art Association, to rebuild art activities. As a result, the overwhelming majority of jurors in the Provincial Art Exhibition had come from the Tai-Yang Art Association. Having

inherited certain entrenched behavioral patterns from the colonial period, Tai-Yang controlled the Provincial Exhibition, which sparked complaints and rebellion from the younger generation. Liu Kuo-sung was one such rebel.

When these organizations and exhibitions were being rolled out, Liu was still a high school and Normal Academy student. At that time, Taiwan had no formal art museums, so all major exhibitions were held at Zhongshan Tang. The colonial-period building was originally named Taihoku Kokaidō (Taipei Public Hall) and completed in 1936 as a public commercial-trade exhibition space. In 1945, upon Chen Yi's arrival in Taiwan, the name was changed to Zhongshan Tang in honor of Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan). Because the most important exhibitions were held there, the surrounding neighborhood naturally developed into an art and literary district. Coffee shops such as Chaofeng Salon and Mingxing Café became favorite bailiwicks of the literary circle. Liu also spent time in these cafés. Through these exhibitions and cultural hot spots, he absorbed the trends and themes of Taiwan's contemporary art scene.

In 1956, the center of art began to shift away from Zhongshan Tang. The National Museum of History on Nanhai Road opened to the public and featured a "national gallery." The adjacent National Art Exhibition Hall also opened to the public. Gradually the important exhibitions gravitated to this new center. Not far from the museum was the United States Information Agency which together with the museum and gallery formed this additional art and literary center.

Further development in postwar Taiwanese modern art was led by He Tiehua. Though serving as a colonel under General Sun Liren, he was by nature an artist rather than a military man. He Tiehua did not get along with the Liang brothers (Dingming, Youming, and Zhongming), whose main purpose as artists was to use art to support Chiang Kai-shek's propaganda. Since the Liangs controlled the Chinese Fine Arts Association and the Anti-Communist/Anti-Soviet Art Exhibition, He Tiehua resolved to establish the Free China Art Exhibition and the Free China Artists' Research Association, and simultaneously publish the first postwar art magazine *New Art*. He Tiehua skillfully adopted the "Free China" political slogan to avoid contravening national policy, and with it he cleverly promoted early twentieth-century modern art movements in his magazine, including Cubism, Fauvism, Futurism, and many other European styles centered in Paris. Compared to the Western-style art derived from the colonial period, these new art styles attracted Liu and other young artists. When Liu encountered He Tiehua at the Free China Art Exhibition, they conversed, and Liu asked questions. This encounter further solidified his decision to take the path of total Westernization in his art.

### National Painting Debates

In the fall semester of 1954, Liu Kuo-sung was already a senior at the Normal Academy. One day, the "national painting" teacher Pu Xinyu complained aloud to students that the Provincial Exhibition jurors had a thoroughly erroneous perception of what "national painting" should be. As mentioned previously, since the Provincial Exhibition's founding in 1946, both jurors and judging criteria had maintained their colonial period traditions; even though the *Tōyōga* department was reinvented as the National Painting Department, the styles and content did not change. At the outset, jurors were all Taiwanese artists trained by the colonial government. In 1948, Ma Shouhua

became the first mainlander to enter the jurors' group, though he alone could not make any difference in the voting. After the Nationalist government moved to Taiwan, Huang Junbi and Pu Xinyu also joined the National Painting Department jury group, though mainlanders were still in the minority. Differing perceptions of "national painting" from the two sides inevitably caused friction, as reflected in Pu Xinyu's complaint to his students. Prior to his complaint, Taiwanese and mainland artists had engaged in discussions on "national painting" and *Tōyōga/Nihonga* multiple times. Upon hearing his teacher's grievance, Liu used the nom de plume "Lu Ting" to pen the essay "Why Squeeze Japanese Painting into the National Painting Department?" The essay's publication reignited disputes over "national painting" in the Provincial Exhibition, which lasted for several decades.

### Western Painting and the Wuyue Huahui (Fifth Moon Painting Group)

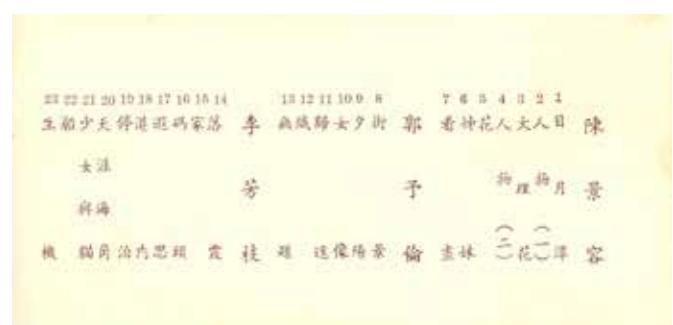
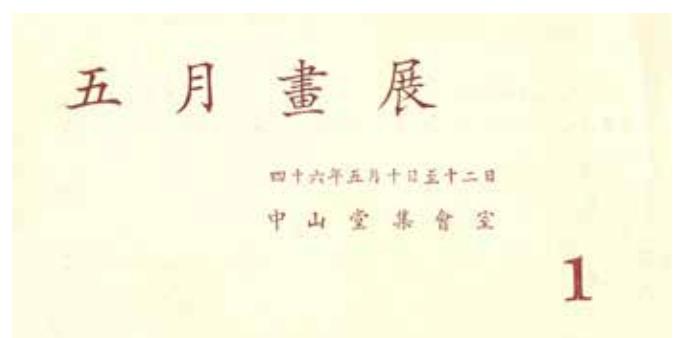
In early 1955, during his final semester at the Normal University, Liu was busily creating his graduation portfolio. When the school's military officer responsible for dress code and hairstyle enforcement came to inspect the dormitories to make sure everything was in order, Liu and his roommates Guo Dongrong (Kuo Tung-jung) and Guo Yulun (Kuo Yu-lun, no relation) were rushing to complete their graduation projects and locked the door so the officer could not enter. As a result, the three were expelled from the dormitory. Guo Dongrong hailed from an impoverished Pingdong (Pingtung) family and had no place to live, but as Liao Jichun's studio assistant, he was allowed to move into Liao's studio. Likewise, Liu was alone in Taiwan with nowhere to go, so Guo Dongrong appealed to Liao to see if Liu could stay there as well, and as a result, the two students stayed there for over half a year.

After Liu had adopted his stance of total Westernization, he became enchanted with the early twentieth-century Parisian art scene, which could be interpreted as a direct influence from He Tiehua's promotion of modern art in the early 1950s on the island. In November 1954, Liu, together with Guo Dongrong, Guo Yulun, and the female student Li Fangzhi (Lee Fang-chih), decided to submit their works to the Provincial Exhibition for competition; while three of the four did not pass the jury selection, Guo Dongrong passed, as he was still painting in the Impressionist style. The others were already painting in Fauvist and Cubist styles far more "advanced" than the works accepted into the exhibition. They remained unconvinced of the jury results. Later they learned that the prizewinners were largely private students of the jurors, and thus came to realize the near impossibility of cracking the inner circle. At the same time, their rejected works were exhibited in the graduation exhibition, earning praise from teachers and critics alike. These four classmates decided that in the summer of 1956, the year of their graduation (four years of education, plus a one-year practicum in schools), they would borrow the Normal Academy's four sketching classrooms and each occupy a room to display their portfolios (Fig. 6). This "Four-Person Joint Painting Exhibition" was the first among young artists at the time and garnered some publicity in the print media. After the exhibition, the group convened at Liao Jichun's studio to discuss future steps. Doubting that there was any way to gain traction in the Provincial Exhibition, Liu Kuo-sung suggested they establish their own painting group, just like the Tai-Yang Fine Art Association during the colonial period.



FIG. 6 Liu Kuo-sung and Xiao Qin at Liu's Four-Person Joint Painting Exhibition, held together with his classmates Guo Dongrong, Li Fangzhi and Guo Yulun in four separate classrooms at the Taiwan Normal Academy, 1956. Behind them on the right is Liu's oil painting Leisure.

In their senior year, these young artists were enamored with the Parisian Salon de Mai, so Guo Yulun proposed using "Wuyue Huahui," a close Chinese equivalent of "Salon de Mai," as the group's formal name, while adopting the French term "Salon de Mai" to be used in non-Chinese contexts. Beyond the symbolism of the name itself, the artists also hoped to transmit the essence of Salon de Mai to Taiwan, which coincided with their ideal of total Westernization. In May 1957, Wuyue Huahui first exhibited at Zhongshan Tang with members comprised exclusively of alumni from the Normal University (which had evolved from the Normal Academy in 1955), and they planned to hold an exhibition every year in May (Figs. 7a and 7b).



FIGS. 7A AND 7B Front cover of pamphlet of the inaugural Wuyue Huahui [Fifth Moon Group] exhibition; and inside page listing some of the featured works. Zhongshan Tang, Taipei, May 1957.



FIG. 8 Liu Kuo-sung and longtime friend Huo Gang at the 4th Ton Fan Huahui (Eastern Painting Group) exhibition, 1960.



FIG. 9 Wuyue Huahui's second exhibition, Taipei, May 1958. From left: Gu Fusheng, Liu Kuo-sung, Guo Dongrong, Huang Xianhui, Chen Jingrou.

Somewhat earlier, in 1954, through the introduction of his Orphans' School classmates Huo Gang and Li Yuanjia, Liu had come to know Xiao Qin (Hsiao Chin), Xia Yang, and Wu Hao, among others. These young artists, all students of Li Zhongsheng (Lee Chun-Shan), either served in the Air Force or were Normal School alumni, and later co-founded the Ton Fan Painting Group (Dongfang Huahui, or Eastern Painting Group). After graduating from Taipei Normal School, Huo Gang was dispatched to teach at Jinmei Elementary School, which became a gathering place for the soon-to-be Ton Fan members. Another gathering place was an air raid bunker; Liu recalled that it was Xia Yang who took him there the first time. Back then, these young artists would lay out their complaints and dissatisfaction with the Provincial Exhibition, which solidified their determination to bring about change.

After Wuyue Huahui's inaugural exhibition in May 1957, Ton Fan held their own inaugural exhibition in November of the same year (Fig. 8). Because Xiao Qin had already left Taiwan and was residing in Spain, he conceived of the inaugural exhibition as a binational endeavor featuring Spanish and Taiwanese modern art. Ton Fan's inaugural exhibition was held at the Xinwen Dalou (News Building) of *Taiwan Xinshengbao* (*Hsin-sheng pao*), which had never before hosted an art exhibition. After this successful event, Xinwen Dalou became a prime exhibition space in the Zhongshan Tang vicinity. In 1958, the Wuyue Huahui's second exhibition was held there (Fig. 9), as was the Navy's Four-Person Joint Painting Exhibition, and later, the Modern Prints Society's exhibition. Xinwen Dalou was a favored venue for art groups in Taiwan. Later, because the National Museum of History included the National Gallery, and because the museum was in charge of Taiwan's exhibitions that were sent overseas, Taiwan's modern art steadily gravitated toward this new center.



FIGS. 10A and 10b  
News articles showcasing Wuyue Huahui's exhibitions in 1958 and 1959, respectively.



### Combat Art and Literature, and Modern Art

Since the early 1950s, the Nationalist government had promulgated the dogma of its combat art and literature policies, but by 1955 the general public had grown weary of it, which in turn diminished the power of the Chinese Art and Literature Association. While rejecting this propaganda, art and literature circles had begun to explore alternatives. Two magazines edited by prominent young writers promoted Western literature: *Wenxue zazhi* (Literary Magazine, 1956-1960) edited by Xia Ji'an (Hsia Tsi-an), and *Xiandai wenxue* (Modern Literature, 1960-1972) edited by Bai Xianyong (Pai Hsien-yung). In addition, the art and literature section of *Free China* magazine was edited by Nie Hualing. By the mid-1950s, painting groups had begun to spring up across the island "like bamboo shoots after rain." Those located in Taipei included the Modern Prints Group (1958), the Changfeng Painting Group (1959), and the Jinri Painting Group (1959). By 1956 and 1957, young artists in Taiwan had clearly begun to rebel against the Provincial Exhibition juggernaut, and by establishing their own painting groups and exhibitions, they hoped to break the Provincial Exhibition's monopoly. Together these painting groups engendered the postwar Taiwanese painting group movement and created new momentum for art beyond the framework of the Provincial Exhibition controlled by colonial-period artists and other exhibitions organized by the Chinese Art and Literature Association (Figs. 10a and 10b).

## Politics and Art

An erroneous perception currently is circulating in the Taiwanese art history field, that when students from the Nanjing Revolutionary Army Orphans' School succeeded in their art careers, it was because they were protected by the Nationalist government, as the school had been founded by Madame Chiang. There is also a suspicion that Liu had criticized Japanese painting in order to collude with the Chinese Art and Literature Association's Cultural Cleansing Movement in 1954. As explained above, the Orphans' School did not continue in Taiwan due to budgetary shortfalls, and students were dispersed to various vocational schools, including the military academy, or high schools. When the Chinese Art and Literature Association launched the Cultural Cleansing Movement, Liu was still a Normal Academy student. The direct source of Liu's discontent was his ink painting teacher Pu Xinyu. Given Liu's repeated rejections of Kuomintang party membership, it stands to reason that he could not have colluded with the Chinese Art and Literature Association.

A little-known saga occurred between Liu and the Kuomintang. From 1950 to 1980, it was common practice to encourage students to join the party. Upon entrance into the Normal Academy as a junior, Liu was asked to do so, but he demurred on grounds that he was not interested in politics. After graduating in 1956, upon arriving at the Officers' Training Center to report for military training, he was again asked to join the party, and he again refused. During that time, officers who majored in fine arts, music, athletics, or Chinese literature were dispatched to Fuxinggang Cadres' College for further training before being sent to the military. After Liu arrived at Fuxinggang Cadres' College, he was approached multiple times, but declined each time. Undeterred, the college persuaded a close friend of Liu's, a Chinese literature major who frequently played basketball with him, to try to change Liu's mind. Liu remained unmoved. The pressure was increased with threats and enticements. His classmate told Liu that if he did not join the party, he would have no chance of becoming a school principal in the future, and as Liu was alone in Taiwan, if he did not join the party, he "might have difficulty going overseas." When these threats all failed, he was informed that no student who had ever passed through Fuxinggang Cadres' College had not joined. "I will be the exception," he retorted. His classmate nervously replied, "You are so adamant — aren't you afraid that people will suspect you're a member of the other party?" Upon hearing this, Liu pounded his fist on the table: "Are you accusing me of being a communist?" The classmate realized this was a lost cause, so the long campaign to get Liu to join the party ended there.

Because he had refused to join the Kuomintang, Liu was not trusted to be an officer with direct contact with soldiers. Unlike many of his friends dispatched to distant islands such as Penghu, or war zones such as Jinmen (Kinmen), Liu was sent to the Marine Corps' headquarters in the Zuoying district of Kaohsiung, as a second lieutenant in the entertainment troupe. Since he had almost nothing to do except paint posters when there were performances, Liu created all the works for his first Wuyue Huahui exhibition. It was there that he befriended four painters who later formed the Sihai Huahui (Four Seas Painting Group): Hu Qizhong (Hu Chi Chung), Fong Chung-ray (Feng Zhongrui), Sun Ying, and Qu Benle.

By the end of the 1950s, the momentum for establishing modern art groups had become unstoppable. Urged on by the overseas Chinese scholar Gu Xianliang, who was in Taiwan at the time, these

painting groups decided to establish the Chinese Modern Art Center on March 25, 1960, in conjunction with the opening of a joint exhibition of all painting groups at the National Museum of History's National Gallery. Altogether there were seventeen painting groups hailing from north to south, with 145 artists planning to participate, and of the seventeen, the four major northern groups (Wuyue Huahui, Ton Fan, Modern Prints, and Changfeng) organized the event. Members of these art groups often convened at the Café Astoria (Mingxing Kafeiguan) to discuss the organization of the Center and the exhibition.

Up to that point, the Nationalist Party had not interfered with modern art activities, and new art groups had no contact with the Chinese Art and Literature Association. Those who did not wish to see modern art take root in Taiwan, however, such as Liang Youming and Liang Zhongming, would seize opportunities to level accusations of communist sympathies and subversion, which erupted during the notorious "Qin Song Incident." The Liang brothers' anti-modern art stance had begun before Liu and other young artists promoted modern art. This history began with factional struggles within the military. When He Tiehua arrived in Taiwan, because he had the backing of General Sun Liren, he often waved the flag of "Free China" to promote Western modern art that symbolized freedom, an approach wholly incongruent with the Liang brothers' focus on promoting Chiang Kai-shek's national policies and glorifying his personal achievements. Needless to say, the two camps did not get along. With the Chinese Fine Arts Association, a sub-branch of the Chinese Art and Literature Association, dominated by the Liang brothers, He Tiehua walked out and established his own Free China Artists' Research Association. To countervail the Anti-Communist/Anti-Soviet Exhibition controlled by the Liangs, He Tiehua founded the Free China Art Exhibition. In 1955, when General Sun Liren's power waned, it triggered the demise of several hundred officers' careers, including that of He Tiehua. Later, seizing the opportunity to courier artworks to overseas exhibitions, He Tiehua left Taiwan. Without him in the way, the Liangs directed their anger and hatred toward the younger generation of modernists, particularly because they had been influenced by He Tiehua and Li Zhongsheng. The vendetta came to a frightening climax with in 1960.

In November 1959, the artist Qin Song (Chin Sung) had won a prize at the São Paulo Biennale, subsequently becoming a center of attention in Taiwan's print media. The Chinese Modern Art Center's organizing committee had also planned to invite Li Dijun (Li Ti-tsun), Taiwan's ambassador to Brazil, to participate in the founding ceremony and present a prize to Qin Song. Liu Kuo-sung was entrusted with curatorial responsibilities for organizing the exhibition of members' paintings, while installation was controlled by the National Museum of History.

On the morning of March 25, Liu arrived at the exhibition hall around ten o'clock to ensure that the works had been properly installed, but Liang Youming, Liang Zhongming, and the seal-carver Wang Wangsun had arrived in the gallery before him. Soon afterward, these anti-modernist artists pointed at Qin Song's painting and shouted, "Topple Chiang! Topple Chiang!" Liu quickly ran over, only to witness the museum's director, Bao Zunpeng, his face white with fear, order the painting to be wrapped and sealed, with a date written on the packaging, and immediately cancel both the opening and founding ceremony for the Chinese Modern Art Center. Because Liu was the sole member in the exhibition hall, he ran outside to summon members of the Ton Fan and other



FIG. 11 Founding ceremony of the Chinese Modern Art Center, United States Information Agency (USIA), March 29, 1960.



FIG. 12 Zhang Longyan (second from right) together with (r. to l.) Liu Kuo-sung, Wu Nianzu, Peng Wanchi, Qin Song, and writer Zhong Meiyan on the set of "Evening Conversations on Art and Literature," a television program hosted by Zhong, 1965.



FIG. 13 Liu Kuo-sung experimenting in new forms of Chinese painting, applying plaster to painting surface to create new textural effects. Taipei, 1961

modern art groups. Artists from central and southern Taiwan gradually assembled outside of the museum.

Around noon, members held an impromptu meeting on the museum lawn. Painting groups from central and southern Taiwan withdrew from participation, but northern groups realized that if they withdrew, they would appear guilty, so they resolved not to back down. Liu suggested moving the event to the USIA, so that afternoon, he and two participants, one from Ton Fan and one from Modern Prints, went to meet with the Center's director. They were able to borrow the exhibition hall for the week of March 29, so, according to Liu, they held the founding ceremony for the Modern Chinese Art Center there and elected Yang Yingfeng as inaugural director (Fig.11). Taiwan's ambassador to Brazil, Li Dijun, also attended the ceremony. After the Qin Song Incident, professors Liao Jichun and Sun Duoci from Provincial Normal University, along with the calligrapher Zhang Longyan, joined the endeavor to lend support for young artists at the USIA venue. Zhang would prove to be extremely crucial to resolving the crisis (Fig. 12).

Surprisingly, following the dramatic showdown at the National Gallery, no further action was taken, though artists were convinced that they would be pursued by authorities that night. As it happened, Zhang Longyan, at the time Chancellor of the National Taiwan Academy of Arts and a staunch supporter of modern art, had intervened. Zhang had worked as an intelligence officer on the mainland and was well acquainted with Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jingguo), Chiang Kai-shek's son. When news of the Qin Song Incident reached him that day, he went to meet with Chiang Ching-kuo to explain that modern artists had no intention of sabotaging the government. Due to Zhang's personal relationship with Chiang and Chiang's trust in him, the unfortunate incident was brought to a close and the case was not pursued further. The Nationalist government had issued no policy directives to hinder the development of modern art, yet the Liang brothers, with their status as the "Chiang-clique painters," and their narrow-mindedness and nosy personalities, caused much unnecessary stir. Fortunately, Zhang Longyan's personal relationship with the Chiangs was far deeper than that of the Liang brothers, and thus he was able to ameliorate the situation and settle the case.

### Necessity for New Directions

For the third Wuyue Huahui exhibition in 1959, Liu Kuo-sung had begun to experiment with plastering canvas to create an uneven surface on which he could create ancient-Chinese-painting-inspired abstract oil paintings (Fig. 13). (Zhang Longyan liked them and asked the seal-carver Wang Zhuangwei, a Normal University professor, for an introduction.) Zhang had been sent to the United Nations as a representative of the Republic of China in the cultural division. He was well acquainted with modern Western art and was himself a highly accomplished calligrapher. Since they became friends, Liu would query Zhang about Western modern art. Prior to the Qin Song Incident, Zhang had published numerous essays on the intersection of calligraphy and abstract expressionism, including one that expounded modern American art (replicas) that were exhibited at the USIA in Taipei. Through Zhang's efforts and other means, young artists in Taiwan at the time recognized the important influence of Chinese calligraphy in Western modern art.

United States Information Agencies in Taiwan were special spaces, equivalent to the territory of the United States, and not even the Liang brothers with their intensive bullying tactics would

五月畫會會員作品  
將運美國巡迴展覽



dare violate the “border” at the facility on Nanhai Road to try and spoil the party. The key function of overseas USIAs was to propagate the postwar modernization of American culture. To promote American art, the centers’ libraries stocked numerous magazines and reports on Abstract Expressionism that would come to inspire Taiwanese artists. Although while at the Normal Academy Liu was focused on Western and early twentieth-century Parisian art, and vowed to pursue a path of total Westernization, after encountering Abstract Expressionism and learning about the way Chinese calligraphy had profoundly influenced Western modern art, inspiring a syncretic approach that blended East and West and had the most globality, Liu began to look inward and shift from total Westernization to a new path of eclecticism. He not only viewed this as his personal pursuit, but also devoted much energy and effort to persuading all Wuyue Huahui members to pursue this blended approach. This change of focus also broadened the criteria for membership in the group, originally restricted to Normal University alumni, to artists interested in promoting an eclectic pursuit of modern Chinese art. In 1961, Hu Qizhong and Fong Chung-ray of the Four Seas Painting Group joined Wuyue Huahui. At this time, the original foreign name of the group, Salon de Mai, was changed to Fifth Moon Group to acknowledge its Chinese identity (Figs. 14a-c).

To carry out the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty, the United States sent a large number of military personnel to Taiwan, headquartered at the site of today's Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the adjacent park in Yuanshan. Military families were largely located in Shilin, Tianmu, and Yangmingshan. Among them was Mrs. Jeanne A. Watten, a modern art enthusiast who opened the Art Guild Studio and Gallery on Zhongshan North Road to represent Chinese, overseas Chinese, and foreign modern artists. She appreciated Fifth Moon and Ton Fan artists largely because they pursued a syncretic style and developed a distinctive modern Chinese painting that sought to incorporate Western modernism. This new visual vocabulary could be easily understood by both sides while still showing distinctive Chinese characteristics. Liu's cooperation with Mrs. Watten continued even after she returned to the United States. In addition to the stimulus of American abstract expressionism, Taiwan's own artistic environment also affirmed Liu's commitment to this trajectory.

A vast collection of artworks originally from the Palace Museum in Beijing had been moved to Taiwan in 1948, and objects from the collection were exhibited in the first National Palace Museum structure in Beigou, Taizhong, a location not easily accessible to

**FIG. 14A** English-language version of pamphlet from Fifth Moon's 6th "Modern Painting" exhibition at the National Museum of History, May 1962.

**FIG. 14B** Liu Kuo-sung in front of his recent paintings at Fifth Moon's 6th exhibition, May 1962.

**FIG. 14C** Article from *United Daily News* of May 22, 1962, announcing that the Fifth Moon Group's "Modern Painting Exhibition" would travel to the United States in October that year.



**FIG. 15 Attributed to Liang Kai (c. 1140–c. 1210)**  
***Immortal in Splashed Ink.*** Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 19.17 × 10.9 in  
 (48.7 × 27.7 cm). Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei

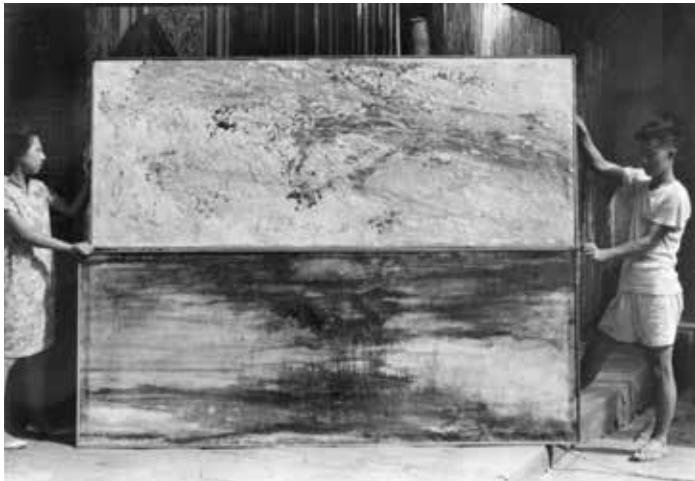


FIG. 16 Liu Kuo-sung and his wife Li Mohua holding up a pair of Liu's experimental works in their dormitory residence at the Taipei Botanical Gardens, 1961.

the public. The Museum published illustrated books of ancient paintings, and through studying these masterworks, Liu was inspired to utilize oil paints to represent them in abstract form. This new style impressed Zhang Longyan. In 1961, a preview of the National Palace Museum collection was held in Taipei before highlights of the collection were shipped to the United States for exhibition. That was Liu's first direct encounter with ancient Chinese paintings. He was particularly astounded by Fan Kuan's *Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams*. Later on he studied *Immortal in Splashed Ink* attributed to Liang Kai (Fig. 15), and *Two Patriarchs Harmonizing their Minds* attributed to Shi Ke, now in the Tokyo Museum. Liu recognized that even working with paper and silk, artists in antiquity were able to create masterpieces.

At that time, there was a trend in architecture of using concrete reinforcement rods to imitate ancient Chinese post-and-beam structures. Critics of this approach questioned the appropriateness of using concrete to represent wood. Such criticism triggered Liu to examine his own approach to creating Chinese-flavored abstract oil painting. After seeing the National Palace Museum preview, Liu clearly knew that he had to return to experimenting with Chinese painting media to create his own modern art. His new approach also influenced the entire direction of the Fifth Moon. At the time, Liu was living in a dormitory at the Taipei Botanical Garden, which became a gathering place for Fifth Moon members. They would convene once a month and each member would bring two of the best creations of the past month to share, discuss, and critique (Fig.16).

### Publishing and Cultural Debates

Soon after his arrival in Taiwan in 1949, Liu Kuo-sung tapped into his literary skills and began to publish modern poems and essays. While studying at the Normal Academy, he participated in creating student modern poetry posters called *Xiliu* ("fine flowing streams"). In late 1954 he published "Why Squeeze Japanese Painting into the National Painting Department?" in the popular newspaper *United Daily News*. This was his first commentary-style essay, and triggered the cultural debate focused on "national painting" in the Provincial Exhibition. Liu also engaged in other cultural debates. In the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan's cultural sphere was largely divided into three distinctive

camps. The Neo-Confucianist school was represented by traditional philosophers such as Fang Dongmei, Tang Junyi, Xu Fuguan, Zhang Junli, and Mou Zhongsan. In 1958 they jointly published "Manifesto on the Reappraisal of Chinese Culture: Our Joint Understanding of the Sinological Study Relating to World Culture Outlook." Those who promoted total Westernization included Dr. Hu Shi (Hu Shih), President of Academia Sinica, the famed cultural figure Li Ao, and the modern poet Ji Xian (Chi Hsien). In 1961, Hu Shi delivered a speech titled "Urgent Social Reforms for Scientific Development," which was later published in *Wenxing* (Apollo) magazine. Li Ao lent support with his essay, "Diagnosis of People who Discuss Chinese and Western Cultures," which also appeared in *Wenxing* in 1961. The poet Ji Xian promoted "horizontal transplantation" and vowed to carry forward the spirit of all modern poetry schools since Charles Baudelaire. Between these two camps were the poet and theorist Yu Guangzhong (Yu Kwang-chung), representing the Lanxing ("Blue Star") Poetry Society, and numerous modern painters who had adopted a syncretic Sino-Western approach suffused with strong national pride.

During this debate, Yu Guangzhong went head-to-head with Ji Xian, while Liu Kuo-sung went head-to-head with Xu Fuguan and a few other military writers. Using tactics similar to those of the Liang brothers, critics of modern art regularly accused artists of being communist sympathizers. This was not only poisonous but had potentially deadly consequences. During those years, Liu was the most outspoken in fighting such baseless accusations. The debate had been triggered by Xu Fuguan's essay "The Telos of Modern Art" published in Hong Kong's *Overseas Chinese Daily*, to which Liu responded with "Why Consign Modern Art to the Enemy: Questions for Mr. Xu Fuguan" published in *United Daily News*, questioning Xu Fuguan's assertions. Xu then responded with a sequel, "The Telos of Modern Art—A Response to Mr. Liu Kuo-sung" in the *United Daily*. Xu further pursued the issue in "Examining the Life-Attitude through Artistic Transformations," published in *Overseas Chinese Daily*, which was countered by Liu's "Emblem of the Free World—Abstract Art," in the *United Daily*. This debate went back and forth between Liu and Xu, involved other critics such as Xie Aizhi and Yu Junzhi, and ended with Liu's essay "Mr. Xu Fuguan's Discussion on 'The Telos of Modern Art,'" which appeared in *Zuopin Magazine* in 1962. In his debates with military writers, Liu responded to the writer pen-named Hong Xifang with "Time for Hong Xifang To Knock It Off!" in *Wenxing* magazine.<sup>1</sup>

Liu Kuo-sung and Yu Guangzhong, two of the key proponents of syncretic cultural developments, met through their respective affiliation with *Bihui* magazine. *Bihui* had originally been published by the Chinese Art and Literature Association, but it was about to be terminated due to budgetary shortfalls. Yu Tiancong, Liu's friend from the Orphans' School, had an uncle, Ren Zhuoxuan, a key figure in the Association and renowned for his study of Sun Yat-sen's 'Three Principles of the People.' Ren himself owned Pamir Bookstore (Pami'er shudian) in Taipei, and decided to take over *Bihui* magazine and hand it over to his nephew, who was still a student at Zhengzhi University. As editor of *Bihui*, Yu Tiancong naturally sought Liu's assistance for the art sections. Seizing this opportunity, Liu published numerous essays in *Bihui* under a variety of pen names; as he was still immersed in the mindset of total Westernization, most essays aimed at introducing Western modern art. After graduating from university, Yu Tiancong went to serve his compulsory military duty in Jinmen and handed

the editing duties to Liu. This was around the time when Yu Guangzhong returned from overseas study in the United States, and through *Bihui*, he and Liu became fast friends. In the early 1960s, when the Fifth Moon Painting Group embarked on the syncretic Sino-Western approach with strong national sentiment, Yu Guangzhong shared a similar view among modern poetry circles. Between 1961 and 1965, Yu Guangzhong became Fifth Moon's staunchest supporter through his essays emphasizing modernity and Eastern subjectivity, such as "Lofty Simplicity of the Fifth Moon" (1962), "Ode to Saddle-less Riders" (1963), "On from Clairvoyancism" (1964), and "The Dawn of Greatness" (1964).<sup>2</sup> Yu Guangzhong was the behind-the-scenes hero who constructed the theory for the Fifth Moon Painting Group.

Wenxing Bookstore was founded in 1952 by Xiao Mengneng, and specialized in Western and other foreign books. In the early days when information about international art was scarce, Liu as a poor student would go to the bookstore and flip through Western art publications to learn from them. His later encounters with Zhang Longyan and Yu Guangzhong further deepened his study and knowledge of modern Western art. In 1957, Xiao Mengneng began publishing *Wenxing* magazine, which opened up a wider platform for introducing Western knowledge, including art and literature. The periodical simultaneously became a platform for cultural debates in Taiwan; Hu Shih's 1961 speech "Urgent Social Reform for Scientific Development" appeared in it, triggering debates between the pro-Chinese and pro-Western camps. Liu Kuo-sung himself did not engage in debates with the total Westernization camp, mainly because they did not criticize modern art. He did, however, have an odd encounter with Li Ao, editor of *Wenxing* and an acquaintance of Liu's, who was a staunch supporter of total Westernization.

As proprietor of Wenxing Bookstore and magazine, Xiao Mengneng often hosted banquets for writers. After one such occasion, Li Ao invited everyone to his residence for tea. After the conversation had gone for a while, Li found an excuse to show Liu Kuo-sung his impressive book collection. When they arrived at a corner of the room, Li opened a drawer, whereupon Liu was stunned to find that the drawer was full of materials about Liu himself. Li Ao remarked, "You have seen this today, so you should not offend me. If you offend me, you know the consequences." Keenly aware of Li Ao's aggressive nature, Liu worried that if he got too close to Li he might indeed easily offend him, so he resolved to keep his distance. However, while Li Ao was editor of *Wenxing*, Liu would still contribute essays.

## International Fame

While studying in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa, Yu Guangzhong took a course taught by Prof. Chu-tsing Li. At that time, the Chinese art history field was in its infancy in the United States, and the collection at the National Palace Museum in Taipei was the focus of scholarly research. In the early 1960s, many scholars would use their summer breaks to visit Taiwan to view paintings. Yu Guangzhong seized such an opportunity when Prof. Chu-tsing Li visited Taiwan to introduce him to Liu Kuo-sung, and through Liu, several Fifth Moon members also came to the attention of Prof. Li. In 1965, Prof. Li and his student Thomas Lawton curated the *New Traditions in Chinese Landscape* exhibition that toured the United States. Fifth Moon members Liu, Zhuang Zhe (Chuang Che), and Fong Chung-ray were included.



FIG. 17 Liu Kuo-sung and Chu-tsing Li at Liu's solo exhibition at the William Rock Nelson Gallery of Art, University of Kansas, 1967.



FIG. 18 Liu Kuo-sung at opening of his first solo exhibition in the United States at the Laguna Beach Museum, California, 1966. Then-museum director Richard Armstrong is in foreground.

This exhibition opened the international chapter of the Fifth Moon Group, which elevated Liu to international status and attracted the attention of scholars such as Michael Sullivan and James Cahill. (Fig. 17)

Through Prof. Li's help, Liu was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1966 to visit the United States and Europe to tour museums and modern art galleries, and he also had several solo exhibitions there (Fig. 18). Thomas Lawton, at the time a young scholar of Chinese art and protégé of Chu-tsing Li, arranged the entire trip. It was not until September 1967 that Liu returned to Taiwan. Needless to say, the opportunity for a global art tour in those days was virtually unthinkable for a Taiwanese artist. When this author asked how such a life-changing experience influenced his theoretical construct and artistic style, Liu replied, "My theoretical construct did not change. In fact, I became even more confident about the path I have chosen. I have chosen a path that no one had walked before, and I created a path that inspired many people to continue to explore.... As for influences, I was influenced by art such as Hard-edge [painting] because I hoped to bring Western concepts of faceted objects into Chinese painting. Chinese painting mainly emphasized dots and lines, but not facets, and this is a strong point of Western art, so I introduced it into Chinese painting. Other techniques such as airbrush and acrylic pigments were all Western influences that I began to use in my art after returning from the United States."

## Postscript

Against all odds, Liu Kuo-sung came of age and overcame many obstacles to flourish as an artist during the height of the violence, chaos, and displacement of the Chinese national crisis and civil war. Growing up in this hardscrabble environment and having had to leave his mother and family while only a junior in high school, Liu was bereft of all family bonds and support, and like an orphan, he struggled in Taiwan on his own. Yet this environment enabled him to develop his tough, uncompromising character: just as when he was fleeing from the disasters of war on the mainland, in Liu's life in Taiwan he also had to face life and death decisions every day. In the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan, he bravely defended his artistic ideas and fought his critics without hesitation.

Taiwan's art and literary environment contained elements of peril, yet many offerings of camaraderie. Facing his critics, Liu Kuo-sung used rational arguments to parry accusations of communist sympathies. Friends who shared his views likewise did not shy away but stood up to support him, and together they created an exuberant, vibrant cultural milieu in 1950s–1960s Taiwan. His endeavors and causes led him to befriend the poet Yu Guangzhong and through Yu he came to know Prof. Chu-tsing Li (Li Zhujin); through Li, he gained international exposure through exhibitions in the United States. Likewise, with Rockefeller Foundation support, he embarked on a global art tour that further strengthened his convictions and ideals.

Before leaving Taiwan for the first time in 1965, Liu had realized that in order for Chinese painting to rise on the global stage, it had to shed its intrinsic nationalistic entrenchment. Therefore, in 1964, Liu and friends such as Yu Huansu established the Chinese Modern Ink Painting Association as a way of formally detaching themselves from the term "national painting" and its nationalistic connotations. Upon returning to Taiwan in September of 1967, Liu set about establishing the Chinese Ink Painting Study Association in 1968 with like-minded friends such as Sun Ying, Fong Chung-ray, Hu Nianzu, and He Huaishuo.

The four major traditional *guohua* painting groups (Qiyou, Liuli, Bapeng, and Renyin) held a joint exhibition in coordination with the International Symposium on Chinese Painting which convened in 1970 in Taipei. The event provided a vehicle for Taiwan to prove to the international Chinese art history community that traditional Chinese culture had developed vibrantly in Taiwan, signifying a Chinese cultural renaissance. Liu's Chinese Ink Painting Study Association likewise seized the moment to showcase how they had transcended tradition, and during the symposium, the Association held its second ink painting exhibition. In 1972, the Chinese Ink Painting Study Association held its National Ink Painting Exhibition, inviting artists from Hong Kong to participate. That same year, through Prof. Chu-tsing Li's introduction, Liu became chair of the Fine Arts Department at Hong Kong University. While in Hong Kong, Liu advocated *bimo geming* (brush and ink revolution). He told his students that Chinese painting did not necessarily have to conform to traditional brush and ink philosophy, and he urged them to "first seek to be unique, and then to be excellent" (*xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao*). His students then turned their studios into laboratories for art and triggered the fervor for Hong Kong's modern ink painting.

While in the United States, through poet Nie Hualing's introduction, Liu came to know the famed poet Ai Qing, and in 1981, through Ai, Liu was invited to the mainland to participate in the founding of the Chinese Painting Research Institute—his first



FIG. 19 Liu Kuo-sung in Beijing as a special guest at the founding of the Chinese Painting Research Center, 1981. From left to right, artists Ya Ming, Liu Kuo-sung, Mr. and Mrs. Li Keran, Mr. and Mrs. Wu Zuoren.



FIG. 20 Liu Kuo-sung in Beijing in 1983 with artists Ai Qing, Li Keran and Lin Lin (l. to r.) on the occasion of Liu's first exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Beijing.

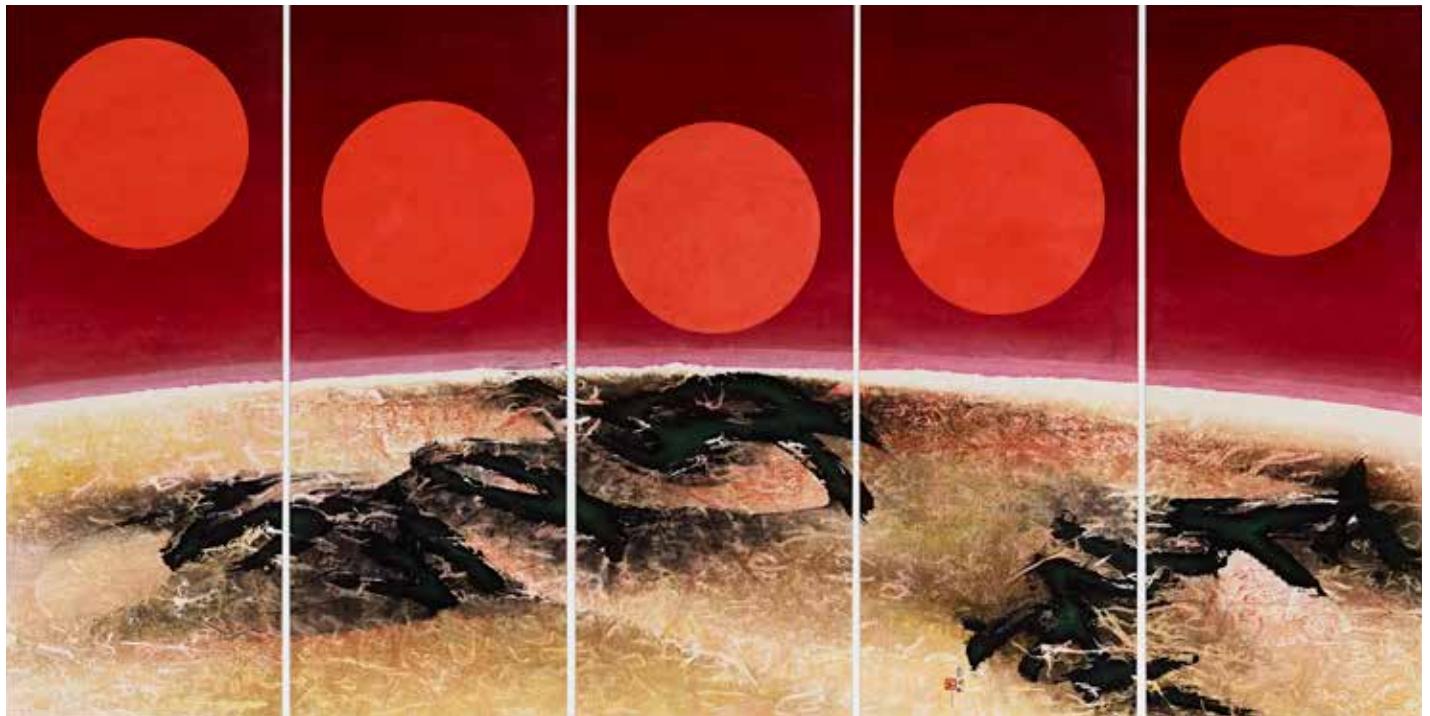
chance to meet with renowned artists from the PRC (Fig. 19). Since that time, Liu has been very active in mainland China, holding exhibitions and workshops, and his painting style and artistic ideas have exerted profound influence on younger mainland artists (Fig. 20).

In the "long river" of Chinese ink painting history there have been iconic, pioneering artists who broke from tradition. In the twentieth century, colonial invasions, Japanese aggression, and the Chinese civil war forced Liu Kuo-sung to land in Taiwan, and Taiwan's art and literary environment of the 1950s and 1960s cultivated in him the will to instigate a revolution in Chinese modern painting. Liu's uncompromising stance revolutionized Chinese painting in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. His revolutionary achievements were on a par with those of C.C. Wang (Wang Jiqian) in New York, and Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji) and Zhu Deqing in Paris, yet because he insisted on educating future generations, his impact has far surpassed that of these other great artists with global reputations.

1 [The articles by Liu Kuo-sung and Xu Fuguan cited here appear in newly translated versions by Alan C. Yeung and Valerie C. Doran in this Reader, 25-31.]

2 ["On from Clairvoyancy" is translated in this Reader, 53-55.]

**Midnight Sun, 1969**  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper  
61.50 x 120 in (156.2 x 304.8 cm)  
Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for  
Visual Arts, Stanford University,  
Stanford



**Liu Kuo-sung**

**PAST, PRESENT, TRADITION**

1962

## 1 The history of art since the founding of the Republic is just a blank page

The slogan “Chinese Renaissance” is by no means new: it was integral to the May Fourth Movement, and continues to be shouted in Taiwan today. But no matter how often we chant this slogan, the “Chinese Renaissance” is still nowhere in sight. If we still aspire to such an ambition, it behooves us first to undertake some review and reflection, in order to draw some lessons from the past and apply them to our future.

Led by a coterie of thinkers and writers, the May Fourth Movement was seminal in its importance, and its impact still resonates today. It is undeniable that whatever progress has been made in literature and science in contemporary China can be credited to the May Fourth movement. During the time when the movement was active, Cai Jiemin [Cai Yuanpei, 1868–1940] made this urgent appeal: “In a cultural movement, art must not be forgotten!” Yet, the fact that in the Italian Renaissance it was the fine arts that held the primary position was indeed forgotten. This is one of the major reasons why the May Fourth Movement failed to bring about a Chinese Renaissance. When discussing the idea of this Renaissance today, I don’t mean to say that we insist that artists should be given priority. My point rather is that we artists should neither shirk our responsibilities nor underestimate ourselves, because we have an important role to play. We don’t want to repeat the history of our May Fourth predecessors and fail to make a lasting mark on the future art history of our people. Perhaps there are still some today who complacently repeat that the May Fourth Movement brought Western art to China. That may be true, but frankly speaking the task of introducing Western art was very inadequately done, for up to the present day the May Fourth artists are still stuck in imitating the Western artistic styles of the nineteenth century and earlier. May I then pose the question of whether we should be adopting other people’s established art forms as the foundation of our own creative endeavors?

Some may seek to put the blame on the harsh conditions in our society today. They point to the expanding population and the increasing difficulty of scratching out a living, and say that what the people require most is material sustenance, practical things like firewood, oil, rice, and salt: not spiritual food, not art. And since contemporary society places no real value on artists, parents oppose the desires of children who wish to dedicate themselves to the arts, pushing them instead to learn technical or administrative skills, so that they can earn enough for a materially comfortable life. With China under the sway of this kind of misguided thinking, the plight of artists is sorry indeed. In order to survive they have no choice but to compromise with a hostile environment, not only producing works that fail to promote the elevation of the human spirit, but even worse turning art from a pure pursuit into a mere tool for making a living, as they seek to win a word or two of praise

from some officious dignitary or earn a profit from some wealthy philistine. Under such conditions, how can art escape being reduced to a mere vulgar commodity, an object of pedestrian amusement?

[Mencius said,] “A man must first despise himself, and then others will despise him.” The actions of certain Chinese masters have only served to compound society’s disdain for art and scornful attitude towards artists. As a result, art has lost both its status and dignity in Chinese society, to say nothing of its capacity to inspire a sense of aesthetic beauty, spiritual courage, and moral compassion. This decline in art’s social importance means that the Chinese people have become bereft of the spiritual sustenance and emotional comfort that [art can provide]. We see the consequences of this in the increasing moral bankruptcy of the life many people lead, in which all sense of native human compassion has been lost. Instead, cruel and selfish behavior has become the norm: news of murders, adultery, theft, and corruption occupy entire pages of our newspapers, and the future of our society appears increasingly bleak and hopeless. How can a “Renaissance” emerge under such conditions?

On the other hand, the original Confucian system of ethics was perverted into a toxic substance by ambitious men of later generations. This toxic legacy taught young people that patience and forbearance were the highest goals. The Neo-Confucianists of the Song dynasty built on this principle, admonishing people to submit meekly to the will of Heaven and be resigned to their fate; while throughout dynastic history the Imperial autocracy taught the common people that they must obey the forces of power! These conditions would in themselves be sufficient to turn those compatriots not endowed with extraordinary abilities into weaklings whose only response to power and authority is submission.

This is the reality that young people see with their own eyes, hear with their own ears, and experience with their own being. Faced with the turbulence of the world today, for many it feels like the only response possible is to throw up their hands and sigh at their own powerlessness. The stronger among them try their best to find ways to go abroad and make a passive escape; the weaker ones either weep and lament, or lose themselves in decadence and nihilism; some ruin themselves through reckless behavior, while others are reduced to such a state of desperation that they end their own lives through suicide. How, then, can we talk about a Renaissance?

But does this mean that we are completely without hope? No! There is still hope for China. Simply put, the problem is that our art world today lacks artists who are willing to sacrifice fame and fortune in order to undertake the trailblazing work necessary for change. And this work is both arduous and dangerous. It not only requires immense courage and perseverance, but also creative talent, and an unyielding spirit of sacrifice to confront the thorns,

weeds, and rocks that lie before us. A person's life span is limited; one might spend a lifetime working to clear away these thorns, weeds, and rocks, and die before the Renaissance is brought to fruition.

## 2. Compromise, escape, and a common awakening

Given the situation with the previous generation of Chinese masters, let us turn our attention back to the younger generation. Without doubt, the future of any national culture is reliant on the creative power of its youth. Russell made this point very clearly when he said that the human impulse to create is strongest in youth. If a country wants to overcome the crisis of survival, it must find a way to develop the strengths and abilities of its youth, because positive, dynamic, innovative, and enterprising virtues are nascent within the character of young people. When they are fully developed, the exercise of these virtues is enough to boost the proper functioning of society and strengthen the life of the nation! As our President has said: In any epoch, youth is both the foundation and the heart [of culture]. It always is the solidarity and striving of youth that drives both innovation and revival.

As we sigh in our sorrow and despair, let us turn our attention to the younger generation, for we may find some comfort there. Many are working at their jobs with diligence and dedication, while others have returned from studying abroad where they were in constant contact with the art circles of the free world and galvanized by the new international art trends. As a result, in every kind of art department, there is a kind of "common awakening." I feel deeply that our generation has an important mission; that we must unhesitatingly shoulder the burden of realizing the "Chinese Renaissance" and, in a true spirit of sacrifice, fearlessly "descend into hell" and do all we can to foster this Renaissance movement in which our salvation lies. The past is past, and time relentlessly pulls us further into the whirlpool of modern life. This is not the time for us to be timid, or to underestimate ourselves. God sent us into this world of turmoil for a reason: the world needs us, and indeed it cannot do without us.

Our environment is harsh, and the forces of conservatism are tenacious. Ensuring that this movement progresses smoothly and brings about a true Chinese Renaissance is something easier said than done. In the 34th year of the Republic, Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, 1921–2013) and fourteen or fifteen other young emerging artists held the First Independent Art Exhibition in the city of Chongqing, igniting the New Art movement. The conservative forces immediately launched a series of fierce and vicious attacks against the artists, forcing the Independent Art Exhibition to a premature end after only one iteration. Zao Wou-ki himself was compelled to leave the country and flee to Paris. But when, at the age of 47, he returned to the East, he merely passed through [China] and never returned. At a reception held for him in Japan by the local art circles, he recalled that incident with great pain, saying, "I deeply love the country that birthed me and raised me, but it is Paris that nurtured me. The painter that Zao Wou-ki is today belongs to Paris. And so it is to Paris that I will return." Some among his former attackers may well be living in Taiwan now. Yet even though he has become internationally famous, when we witness the way Zao Wou-ki continues to pick through other people's leftovers, how can we not feel humiliated? Zao Wou-ki is a gifted artist who could have created a historic new art movement in the Republic of China, but he was too weak to withstand the

blows leveled against him. Although his artistic conscience supported him in his refusal to compromise with the [pressures of] his environment, yet in the end he fled from his responsibility, and in so doing may well have delayed the progress of the Chinese new art movement by nearly 30 years. I don't know how many talented geniuses of the past were buried in obscurity because they did not have enough willpower and stamina to withstand the conservative forces' vicious rejection and attacks. Fortunately, among young modern artists today there is a deep and common awakening. They have come to realize that compromise and evasion equally can destroy Chinese art; and they also understand that the healer must seek for the miracle cure from within the illness, the sage must discover the noble doctrine from within humanity's despair, and those who are truly dedicated to the art movement must resolutely and courageously seek the way forward from within the decay of the Chinese art world; for despair, evasion and helpless lamentation are useless. It is because of this awakening among the young that Taipei has seen the successive establishment of the Fifth Moon Group, the Ton Fan Group (Dongfang huahui), the Modern Printmaking Association (Xiandai banhuahui), the Four Seas Art Association (Sihai huahui), the Changfeng Painting Association (Changfeng huahui), the Today Art Association (Jinri meishu hui), the Pure Painting Group (Chuncui huahui), and the Chi Hsiang Studio Group (Jixiang huahui). The exhibitions they have been holding one after the other have become like a tide sweeping into our long-barren art scene, uncovering the long-obscured wisdom of the East, releasing the intellectual brilliance of our people, and restoring the creative spirit and glorious history of the artists of the Tang and Song.

These exhibitions have not only avoided the pitfalls of the Independent Art Exhibition of that year, but have already been held six times, while the [quality of] the artworks has progressed from year to year. Never allowing themselves to be defeated by the difficulties and obstacles confronting them, these dedicated and hardworking artists have recharged the atmosphere of the moribund Chinese art scene and infused it with new hope. The most important thing in any new art movement is the creation of real works of art. This is why, over the past six or seven years, young artists engaged in the new art movement have been deeply devoted to their creative work. The impact produced by real art naturally is very great, but there is one thing we have overlooked: When we exhibit our artworks, how many people can really understand them? The vast majority of viewers have no knowledge of new art theories, or any understanding of the evolution and development of art history. Rather, they are used to seeing examples of "fake paintings" that merely pander to accustomed tastes. This being the case, how can we help them to shift their perspectives so that they can truly appreciate the real paintings that are hanging before them? Are we deaf to the complaints and muttered curses arising from their ignorance? I have long felt that our modern art practitioners have done too little to introduce new theories and new trends in thought [to the public]. Not prioritizing this kind of work will ultimately place major limitations on the new art movement. If we don't promote and disseminate new theories to back up the creative work being produced, then our art will not pass the test of our time. Audiences are the supporters of art, so we should be careful not to abandon them at the door of new art. Rather, we should help and guide them in order to forestall the kind of misunderstandings that create unnecessary obstacles.

The Abstract Expressionist movement of the New York School of painting emerged on the international stage less than ten years after the end of the Second World War; today, twenty years later, it occupies the leading position in the Paris art scene, and its momentum continues to build. And us? Clearly, our efforts are still inadequate. With the heavy burden of the Chinese Renaissance on our shoulders, it is not enough merely to shout catchphrases and chant slogans. While dedicating ourselves to our own creative work, we also must have our own theoretical foundation, based on our own unique understanding and ideals; and then we must have a strategy to promote our ideas in society, with a strong sense of responsibility and our feet firmly planted on the ground. Our country is struggling under harsh conditions, and this is no time for dithering.

### 3. Who has betrayed art? Who has destroyed tradition?

Today, as the government advocates the restoration of the national spirit and the promotion of Chinese culture, most people who oppose the new art regard themselves as defenders of traditional values: they equate themselves with tradition. In fact, most of these people are just apprentice painters who have no understanding of what tradition really is, and just desperately cling to the skin and bones of the past. Their knowledge is limited to what their teachers pass on to them. They never bother to read art history, and are unaware that the Chinese paintings they so dutifully copy are result of a process of changes and transformation. They don't study the history of art theory, nor do they understand that creativity is the most important and precious thing about art. They think that tradition can be grasped by copying the forms and styles of the ancients, without any understanding of the true nature of tradition. They pay lip service to tradition all day long, without realizing that they themselves are its true destroyers; for tradition must constantly evolve in order to endure. Change is the intrinsic characteristic of tradition, and creation is the unchanging essence of art. In 1958, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States invited a number of artists to participate in a series of discussions on how to define tradition. The Museum later published an article presenting [the artists'] views, which began with the following statement:

Those who truly accept tradition also defy tradition. The Italian word for "tradition" [*tradizione*] has a double meaning: "to betray" and "to transmit." Tradition does not mean that a particular form must continue to be passed on; rather it means seeking to distill the spiritual essence of the art of the past, as future nourishment for painting. The culture of art, and the intrinsic nature of art, evolve from past creation (which is very different from production). And these in turn become the bones and sinews of an artist's creativity, penetrating deeply into his consciousness where their vitality enriches his creative work. Anyone who opts for wholesale imitation of another person's artistic style will succeed only in fettering [the development] of his own art.<sup>2</sup>

A person who is creative and has a deep understanding of culture and art is never willing to be bound by the forms and styles of his predecessors. Conservatives have often called me a "traitor to art." But in fact, the true purpose of art is creation and self-expression, never destruction or rebellion. Artistic creation must

differ from that which already exists, just as the self must differ from others. Art seeks to create something that is apart from the norm, not to promote rebellion. But if there are those who insist on labelling us as rebels, then perhaps it is because we respect the creation of art, but rebel against the imitation of form, unlike those so-called traditional masters who prefer to stick to the fixed forms and styles of their predecessors and turn their backs on creativity. So if we're talking about betrayal here, then who is the real traitor to art?

At this time in Taiwan painting circles there is a deep divide between those who practice Chinese painting and those who practice Western painting. Chinese painters ask no questions about Western painting, and Western painters show no interest in Chinese painting. This situation is particularly evident in the art exhibitions held across the province. Having observed this phenomenon, Mr. Chuang Zhe (Zhuang Zhe) wrote an article in the *United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao*), warning that the outcome of such a situation will be to trap painting in a dead end with no way forward. From a historical perspective, a flourishing national culture is one that is grounded in its intrinsic civilizational character, and at the same time seeks to absorb elements from other cultures, creating a fresh new style of its time. And this is an ongoing and continuous process.

We can certainly see how this applies to the history of Chinese painting. The clearest example can be found in the changes that occurred in painting after Buddhism was imported to China. (According to available historical records, it was Cao Buxing [act. c. 210–250 CE] who was first influenced by the Buddhist paintings of the Indian monk Kang Senghui [d. 280 CE]. He was followed by Zhang Sengyou [act. c. 500–550 CE] who adopted the three-dimensional shading technique of Buddhist art, and later indirectly absorbed the stylistic influence of Greek statuary through contact with Gandharan art. When we apply this empirical evidence to present-day China, where the direct influx of modern Western culture already has made a significant impact on contemporary thought, and the Chinese painting environment is showing signs of change, what view can we take of this divide between Chinese and Western painting?

If we undertake a deeper reading of Chinese art history, we will find that China is not a conservative country. This current situation has been fueled by a few narrow-minded and short-sighted "authorities" who have never grasped the fact that, in terms of its cultural ideology, the Chinese nation has always had a great capacity to absorb and assimilate. As E.A. Ross states in his book *The Changing Chinese*: "Ancient Chinese culture had a strong power of assimilation. Nestorian Christianity flourished there and vanished. The Jews of Kaifeng lost their language and religion. It has been said that China is like a great sea, and whatever flows into it cannot but become part of it; and indeed this is true!"<sup>3</sup>

In his book *A Brief History of Cultural Exchange between China and the World*, Xiang Da writes:

Chinese culture is not isolated. In every epoch, not only have other nations within its environs sought to engage with China, but within our nation itself there have always been those who hold to the spirit of Master Xuanzang [602–664]: "The Master made such firm resolve that he forgot his meals and crossed dangerous regions as fearlessly as if he were walking on level ground. He defied a myriad of deaths to cross the Pamirs and the Ganges and

for the sake of one word he traveled to the Amravana Garden.”<sup>4</sup> After the Wei and Jin dynasties, the Indian religion [i.e. Buddhism] came east into China. At first they were as distinct as host and guest, but ultimately they developed alongside each other.<sup>5</sup>

Is this not testament to China’s virtues of “tolerance and magnanimity?” This is what led the Swedish Sinologist Dr. Osvald Sirén to state that the “the spirit of Chinese art is transcendent!” Moreover, in his book *The Meaning of Art*, British art critic Prof. Herbert Read talks about the vastness of China, calling it equal to the distance from the extreme north of England to the extreme south of Arabia. He describes how the other nations with which China most communicates and shares certain artistic characteristics are India, Persia, and Japan; that it is from these characteristics that Eastern art was established, and that, like Western Gothic and Greek art, it is an art that transcends national boundaries and belongs to the world.<sup>6</sup>

The reason I have included these quotations here is that the language of [these scholars] is far more objective than our own. What these relatively more objective statements tell us is that Chinese art is not self-contained or closed off to dialogue with others: rather, it has always been engaged in a process of cultural exchange and absorption with the outside world. It has always been cosmopolitan.

Those gentlemen who know only how to operate within a self-limiting sphere, calling themselves “traditionalists,” also repudiate us as the “anti-traditionalists”. I don’t know but that we are actually the most “traditional!” What we abide by is tradition’s “tolerant and all-embracing” spirit, and what we are opposed to is the phenomenon of one generation after another copying what came before, so that ultimately all that is left is an empty shell of the past. And what about those so-called “traditionalists”? They draw a line in the sand to divide Chinese painting from Western painting, and proclaim that the figurative form is sacred and inviolate. This kind of narrow thinking and myopic vision create a state of mutual and perpetual antagonism, making synthesis impossible. They have violated the spirit of “tolerance” and “transcendence” that is integral to the Chinese painting tradition; this is what is deserving of the “anti-traditionalist” label, because this is true “anti-traditionalism!” If there are those who still insist that they are of the “traditionalist” school, then they are merely “pseudo-traditional,” not authentically “traditional.”

#### 4. Painting’s evolution from depicting reality to expressing the idea

We are strong supporters of cultural exchange. From the Qin and Han to the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern dynasties, Chinese culture constantly absorbed external stimuli and influences, with every encounter serving to enrich, rejuvenate and extend our artistic vitality; as a result, Chinese art reached a level of brilliance unprecedented in its history.

From the end of the nineteenth century, Western art’s encounters with the art of the East also contributed to the great achievements of the Impressionist school. The 20th century is an era when the winds from the East are blowing into the West. And as the West absorbs a greater knowledge of Eastern culture and philosophical ideas, its traditionally empirical spirit and highly realistic painting style has begun to shift and change. The realm of abstraction

implicit in Chinese painting concepts such as “writing out the emotion in one’s heart” as well as in the black and white abstraction of calligraphy, have helped Western artists to elevate their practice from the realm of narrative description to that of “pure painting” The Chinese spirit of *xieyi* [freehand painting, lit. “writing or sketching the idea”] has now blossomed in Western painting history as well. Chinese people commonly recognize that *xieyi* painting is superior to realist fine-line painting (*gongbi*) but what they don’t know is that the ultimate goal of *xieyi* painting is to get cast off all external constraints and achieve independence. In other words, it is seeking the state of “pure painting”—the foundation of abstract painting. Being unaware of this, people instead consider that abstract painting goes against the spirit of Chinese traditional culture. It’s really too absurd.

Today, in the ongoing flurry of cultural exchanges between East and West, we must remain clear-eyed and not lose our way. We must recognize both the respective strengths and weaknesses of Eastern and Western art, and cultivate a deeper understanding of the development of Eastern and Western art history. Otherwise, we will repeat the mistakes of our predecessors and put Chinese art on a path to its own destruction. We all are well aware that up to the 19th century Western painting always involved the “knowledge” of observation and the expression of “reality.” However the great masters of the previous generation such as Xu Beihong [1895–1953] and Liu Haisu [1896–1994] failed to understand this, and in the onslaught of cultural interchange they lost themselves, they were unable to hold fast to themselves, as they were mesmerized by the realist techniques through which Western painting created representations of nature. They felt that this was precisely what Chinese painting lacked, and so they abandoned the inherent conceptual realm of *xieyi* painting and dove into the representation of nature. The result was that 20th century Eastern and Western painting underwent a kind of juxtaposition, in which the West benefited greatly from cultural interchange by absorbing the merits of Chinese painting, casting off the long-held precedent of objective realism and turning to the creation of a modern freestyle painting that sought the expression of the abstract world. This caused a whole new resurgence in their formerly outdated practices so that their painting now became the avant-garde, gradually crossing the distances to appear here before us.

In Taiwan today some senior artists who are considered authorities continue to tout realism as the standard. In fact, they have a very limited understanding of Chinese art history. They never speak of stories [from that history] such as Cao Buxing’s [3rd century] transformation of ink drops into flies!<sup>18</sup> Consider the ancient paintings that have come down to us and are familiar to all, such as Han Gan’s [706–783] *Man Herding Horses*, Huang Jucai’s [933–after 993] *Pheasant and Sparrows Among Rocks and Shrubs*, and the famed *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* [by Zhang Zeduan, 1085–1145]: which of these has not achieved a high level of realism? And speaking of chiaroscuro and perspective, I don’t think the achievement of any Western oil painting in the realist landscape mode is superior to the of Song dynasty artist Yan Ciping’s [act. 1119–1162] painting of *The Four Pleasures*. Yet in the history of Chinese painting, Yan Ciping’s name has far less resonance than that of Mi Fu [1051–1107]. Why? The reason is simply that the kind of painting that emphasizes copying from nature is less esteemed and valued.

Chinese and Western art history share a common developmental trajectory in both the areas of theory and practice: that is, a

movement away from realism and towards the more expressive freestyle art of *xieyi*. This development is quite clear in Western art history, while in the less ordered schema of Chinese art historical development it is still possible to find evidence of this trend.

*Xieyi* painting first emerged in the Chinese painting world during the Tang dynasty. According to historical records, Wang Qia [8th century] was the first artist to forego realism in favor of expressive painting, using his splashed-ink technique. In the later Northern Song period Mi Fu carried on the spirit of Wang Qia's freestyle brushwork (see his *Auspicious Pines in the Spring Mountains*, whose cloudy mountains and misty trees were at the time described as influenced by Wang Qia but whose techniques of dots and splashed ink derive from Dong Yuan [934–962]). Then there is Liang Kai [c. 1140–c. 1210] of the Southern Song dynasty (see his work *Splashed Ink Immortal* of ca. 1200, which has been passed down to us over the ages. This work was painted using a minimum of cursive brushstrokes in a style known as his "abbreviated brush" [*jianbi*]). On the theoretical side, Su Dongpo [Su Shi, 1037–1101] observed that "To judge a painting based only on formal likeness is to have no more discernment than a child." Ouyang Xiu [1007–1072] wrote:

Ancient paintings depict ideas and not forms,  
Mei's poems sing of things but conceal no emotion,  
Few are those who understand abandoning form  
to realize ideas,  
No less in looking at painting than in poetry.<sup>9</sup>

And Ni Zan [1301–1374] said, "Painting should be done in a carefree manner with untrammeled brushstrokes; not for the purpose of pursuing verisimilitude, but simply for one's own amusement." This all shows continuous support [of the principle that] the painter values inner truth and opposes mere outer representation; each artist seeks above all to express his inner spirit and attain a realm of brush-and-ink play that goes beyond physical form, faithfully drawing from his inner perception and feelings to express the true spirit of the object. Yuan artists understood that the highly developed abstract realm of calligraphy should be introduced into painting. Therefore, many painters began to use the term *xie hua* ("to write a painting") in place of *hua hua* ("to paint a painting"), particularly emphasizing the word *xie* ("to write"). Their conception was to focus on the skill of using the tip of the brush to "write" expressive brush marks on the painting surface that would reveal the innermost feelings of the heart, in this way achieving a higher level of spiritual resonance and visual charm. It is for this reason that Tang Hou [14th century] said: "To paint plum blossoms means to write plum blossoms, to paint bamboo means to write bamboo, to paint orchids means to write orchids. Why? To paint the pure essence of flowers, the artist writes the image and feelings they evoke, rather than paints their likeness."

Yang Weizhen [1296–1370] said: "Calligraphy flourished in the Jin, painting flourished in the Tang, and calligraphy and painting flourished equally in the Song. Men of letters who paint must also be adept at calligraphy, for the method of painting lies within the method of calligraphy." Zhao Mengfu [1254–1322] is said to have had the following exchange with Qian Xuan [1235–1305]:

[Mengfu asked,] "What is the painting of the scholar gentry?" Xuan answered: "It is the painting of amateurs." Mengfu said: "True, but I have seen [works by] Wang Wei

[669–761] of the Tang, and Li Cheng [919–967], Guo Xi [1020–1090], and Li Gonglin [1049–1106] of the Song, which were all painted by high-minded gentlemen. Yet they transmit the spirit of things and exhaust their subtleties. As for recent men who have done scholars' painting, how very misguided they are!"<sup>10</sup>

And Zhao Mengfu, who was a strong advocate of a "return to antiquity" [*fugu*], wrote in a poem: "When painting stones use the flying white technique, when painting trees follow the seal script style, and use the eight methods when painting bamboo. He who is able to grasp these principles also knows that calligraphy and painting are of the same root."<sup>11</sup> These statements attest that the integration of calligraphy with painting was a common practice among the people of the Yuan period, and from this we can also deduce that there was a strong emphasis on the use of the brush to create *xieyi* painting.

Calligraphy is a unique abstract art native to China. Chinese painters have long known that by integrating calligraphy with painting, they can free painting from the limitations of physical likeness, and then pursue the pure brushplay of expressive line; it's a pity that later generations only understood how to gather up the dregs from their predecessors but had no real comprehension of the meaning of these words regarding [painting] with the heart, the intention, the idea. As a result, this concept regrettably never was developed further. Today it is unexpectedly Westerners (such as the American painters Tobey [Mark Tobey, 1890–1976] and Kline [Franz Kline, 1910–1962], German painter Hartung [Hans Hartung, 1904–1989], French painters Soulages [Pierre Soulages, b. 1919] and Masson [André Masson, 1896–1987]) who have brought it to a higher level of development.

In the six centuries since the Yuan dynasty, what has painting created? What have our most widely celebrated artists, such as the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, Bada [Bada Shanren, 1626–1705], Shitao [1642–1707], Qi Baishi [1864–1957], and others really created? They merely partook in some of the Song legacy of creative freedom and adopted the same stance as the Song masters, and thus their thinking was only slightly more progressive than the conservatism of the Four Wangs, Wu, and Yun.<sup>12</sup> Even Shitao, who had the depth of understanding to write, "Establish spirit amid a sea of ink tones; create vitality with the point of the brush; on a simple piece of paper, bring about a complete metamorphosis; Let light shine forth through the Primordial Chaos," still lacked the necessary courage to abandon the outward representation of nature completely, and to create "pure painting," so we can see how difficult it is to truly create.

## 5. New traditions are built on the foundation of tradition

As *xieyi* painting has been progressing towards the path of pure painting, there have been in each generation I don't know how many still advocating copying and archaism, not only delaying our progress but even causing us to regress, with the result that it is Westerners who have hurried to carry [the achievements of] the past forward, leaving us behind in the dust. As modern Chinese, can we just sit here and watch as Westerners appropriate the great achievements of our tradition one by one and use them to achieve greater heights? If things continue in this way, Chinese culture will be completely swallowed up by Western culture, and we will be left with nothing in the end. Can we just stand by and watch while

the precious legacy left by our ancestors is squandered away by their degenerate descendants? It is just for this reason that we must dedicate all our effort and initiative into laying the foundation for reclaiming our sense of self and establishing both a new tradition and a systematic lineage for Eastern painting; and take back from Western hands the leadership role on the world arts scene. This is the urgent task that lies before us, and it is also the goal of the "Chinese Renaissance."

Some people may say that we are just a group of narrow-minded nationalists, and that to call for the re-establishment of the Eastern system of painting in the midst of the Space Age is simply not "modern" enough. We should be talking about world culture, but of course! But I still remember what the Founder of the Nation [Sun Yat-sen, 1866–1925] said in "The Three Principles of the People"—that until our nation is strong we are not qualified to talk about "world unity." And today, when we are still stuck in a cultural desert, neither are we qualified to talk about "world culture."

What the art circles of the world hope to see from us is a kind of creative work that is truly ours, just as what they hope to see from each painter is a unique creative voice. We often complain that our predecessors were useless, always copying from the ancients, but if we think it through more carefully, can copying [the styles of] the moderns substitute for copying from the ancients? Can imitating the Western substitute for imitating the Chinese? This is simply a case of different degrees of imitation.

If it is true that "art is the absolute manifestation of the individual self," then as someone who was born in the East and lives in the East, the essence of my individual self must be Eastern. And it follows that there must be a certain point of unchanging commonality in the way Chinese artists manifest their inner selves in their art; and this unchanging commonality is national character.

Therefore, I say that the expansion of individual identity is what defines national identity, and we must first possess a national identity before we can talk about universalism. In other words, for

any artwork to take a position on the international art stage it is prerequisite that it evinces both a national identity and an individual identity. This is speaking on the level of spiritual content. On the level of formal content, because of frequent interaction, cultures are constantly in a state of flux, and thus we do not advocate confining ourselves only to those forms and materials that are native to Chinese culture. This is because we are fundamentally opposed to traditional [representational] forms, while in terms of materials, we advocate that the creator should decide what kinds of materials are most suitable for him, and use them freely and without restriction.

And yet, our creative path must lead us through the midst of our culture in order that we can understand the unchanging, intrinsic essence of our national character. In the same way, our path must lead us through Western culture in order to understand the unchanging essence of human nature. And we must also absorb the strongest merits of the different cultures of the world to further nourish ourselves. To manifest one's individuality is not an easy task; there are some people who have never in their lives been able to do so. In order for an artist to manifest his truest self he must engage in a constant process of exploration and seeking; and in our own generation there are no more than five who have succeeded in doing so. But if we have more than ten [artists] who are able to achieve this, then that will be enough for us to establish a new tradition for Chinese art and to take our place as leaders on the world art stage. And when that happens, we will be qualified to talk about world culture.

Come, let us join together in the search for our true selves and for the eternal, universal East; and then together build a new tradition for Chinese art.

(Translation by Valerie C. Doran)

This article was previously published in Chinese as "Guoqu, xianzai, chuantong," *Wenxing (Apollo)* 58 (September 1962): 16–20.

## Notes

- 1 [In using the term "descend into hell" Liu references the Mahayana Buddhist concept of self-sacrifice as espoused in the *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Pūrvapraṇidhāna Sūtra*. The full passage reads:  
Until the hells are empty (of suffering beings), I will not become a Buddha.  
Once all sentient beings are saved, I will attain Buddhahood.  
If I do not descend into hell, who will?]
- 2 [The editors were unable to source the late 1905 publication from The Metropolitan Museum of Art which reported on the artists' discussion group, as cited here by Liu Kuo-sung. The rendering of the quotation here is an English back-translation of this passage as it appears in Liu Kuo-sung's article.]
- 3 [Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Changing Chinese: The Conflict of Oriental and Western Cultures in China* (New York: The Century Co., 1911), 81. The original English quotation from Ross's book is as follows: "Chinese culture has spread and spread until all Eastern Asia bows to it. Nestorian Christianity flourished there and vanished. The Jews of Kaifeng-fu lost their language and religion and became Chinese in all but physiognomy. The conquering Manchus have forgotten their language and literature. "China," it has been finely said, "is a sea which salts everything that flows into it. The guardians of a culture so vanquishing may well be pardoned for regarding as presumptuous any endeavor to improve on." Liu would have read Ross's book or at least this passage in a Chinese translation.]
- 4 [Quotation from *A Biography of the Tripitika Master of the Great C'ien Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1995), 7.]
- 5 [Xiang Da, *Zhong-wai jiaotong xiaoshi* (A Brief History of Cultural Exchange between China and the World) (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1947).]
- 6 [See Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931, reprint 2017). Although in his original Chinese article, Liu presents this passage as a quotation, it is not possible to ascertain from which translation or publication he is quoting; thus the passage is rendered here as a paraphrase.]
- 7 [This is a quotation from Yuan-dynasty painter Ni Zan. The full quotation, from which this statement is taken, has elsewhere been translated as: "I use bamboo painting to write out the exceptional exhilaration in my breast, that is all. Why should I worry whether it shows likeness or not?" Quoted in Harold Miles Tanner, *China: A History, Vol. 1: From Neolithic Cultures to the Great Qing Empire* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 268.]
- 8 [Cao Buxing (ca. 3rd c. CE) was an artist of the Six Dynasties Period (220–589) renowned for his vivid depictions of dragons, tigers, and human figures.]
- 9 [English translation of quotation from Ouyang Xiu cited here by Liu is from Susan Bush and Hsiao-yen Shih, *Early Texts on Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 203.]
- 10 [The dialogue between Zhao Mengfu and Qian Xuan quoted here by Liu is from the ca. 1387 text *Gegu yaolun* (Essential Information for the Judgment of Antiquities) by Cao Zhao (14th century). English translation is adapted from Bush and Shih, *Early Texts on Chinese Painting*, 255.]
- 11 [Quotation is from a poem by Zhao Mengfu inscribed on his handscroll *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Woods* (*Xiushi shulin tu*) discussing the close relationship between painting and calligraphy.]
- 12 [Wang Shimin (1592–1680), Wang Jian (1598–1677), Wang Hui (1632–1717), Wang Yuanqi (1632–1717), Wu Li (ca. 1632–1718), and Yun Shouping 1633–1690, all painters of the Orthodox School of the late Ming and early Qing periods.]

***Misty Mountains Afar, 1969***

Ink and color on paper

58.66 x 121.46 in (149 x 308.5 cm)

Private Collection, Taiwan



Yu Kwang-chung

ON FROM CLAIRVOYANCISM

1964

**SIGHT IS ONE OF THE** primary media through which we perceive the material world. A blind man suffers from imperfection of sensuous experiences. Blindness is, therefore, extremely agonizing; even partial blindness, such as night blindness, color blindness, and snow blindness, will greatly inconvenience the victim. Thus in *Samson Agonistes* the great blind athlete is made to express the despair not only of himself but also of the great blind poet:

Why was the sight  
To such a tender ball as th'eye confined?  
So obvious and so easy to be quenched,  
And not as feeling through all parts diffused,  
That she might look at will through every pore?

Such a sight may be called "bodysight." But, whether it be the eyesight of the mythological Argus, or the bodysight of the biblical Samson, or even the television of modern science, it is confined to the objects of the external world and does not reach the inner reality of things. What we call sight has for its objects things that are visible here and now. What we call memory has for its objects things that were once visible. But what is unseen here and now and there and then we can only try to grasp in our imagination. Of the objects covered by imagination some are visible and some are not readily visible. It is only with the "mind's eye" that we hope to contemplate the latter. Such a faculty may be termed "psychic sight" without which modern art would be utterly inaccessible.

Since the invention of photography a century ago the duty to imitate nature and portray man has been passed on from the artist to the photographer. With each movement in painting since Post-Impressionism is shown a positive acceleration from representation to expression, from the extrinsic to the intrinsic, and from nature to the artist. The development from Cézanne to the abstract art of today, now covert and now overt, is only the logical conclusion of modern aesthetic thought. Naturalism is a name safely dead in art history. "Art does not render the visible; rather, it makes visible." Thus Paul Klee makes the outright declaration in his "Creative Confession."

Like other forms of art, abstract painting starts from nature, but does not end in nature. The space of abstract painting is not the space usually perceived through eyesight; rather, it is "the fifth dimension." In the creative process of art, there are always three forces interacting on one another. They are the ego, nature, and the "way." The ego of the artist tries to grasp the "way" by means of nature; contrariwise, the "way" is revealed to the ego only by means of nature. Thus nature serves as a medium of interaction between the ego and the "way". If a work of art turns out to be a mere imitation of nature, nature would block expression of the ego and revelation of the "way" and the result would be sheer naturalism. If in a work of art we see the "way" only and no trace of

the ego at all, it then ceases to be art and becomes either science or philosophy. Art is both sensuous and intellectual. A successful work of art shows the ego as well as the "way" by the common medium of nature; in fact, the ego and the "way" are mutually illustrative where they meet midway in nature. Mutually dependent, too, are the force of the ego and that of the "way" as perceived by the artist. Art is the production of sensuous experiences, which take place only between the ego and nature. On the other hand, it is also the product of intellectual activities, which are the process by which the ego tries to grasp the "way." Thus the ego, the "way," and nature constitute the inevitable trinity of artistic creation.

By the ego we mean the "I" of the artist; by nature, the material world around us. Of what I call the "way," different philosophical and religious systems offer different names. In the Orient, Lao Tzu calls it "Tao"; *I Ching* (The Book of Changes) calls it "the Great Ultimate"; Buddhism calls it "the Free" and "the Only Way". In the West, Pythagoras names it "Numbers"; Plato, "Ideas"; Spinoza "natura naturans." "Natura naturans" comes close to what Lao Tzu calls "Tao" in *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 25:

Something primordial there was,  
Born ere earth and heaven,  
Inaudible, impalpable,  
Independent, and unchangeable,  
Revolving forever without fail.  
And out of it emerged the world.  
I know not its name,  
And address it as Tao.

Art aims at pursuing the infinite through the finite, at grasping nothingness (Tao) by means of something (I). Tao is the Form without a form, the Image without an object, yet it appears multi-form to different artists. In fact, we are reversing the creative process when we say, as we used to say, that art must express the individuality of the artist. Self-expression is after all the result of artistic creation, whereas pursuit of the Tao is its motive. Individuality is a spontaneous by-product in the course of the artist's discovery of the Tao.

"Tao" is the Whole, the Great Ultimate, the Only Way. It is so great that nothing is outside it, and at the same time so minute that nothing is inside it. It is invisible, inaudible, impalpable. "Tao Te Ching," Chapter 21 says: "Tao is elusive and evasive. Evasive, elusive, it nevertheless contains an image. Elusive, evasive, it yet contains an object." It is exactly this elusive and evasive image as well as object that abstractionism is trying to catch. Yet the image manifests no definite shape, and the object possesses no body; that is to say, they are not readily seen in the world of representational painting. It is true that abstract painting is non-representational, but it does not follow that abstract painting present no image. It does not mirror

external objects directly, yet it has its own images and visions. This non-representational image, when presented on the canvas, turns out to be the irreducible form of forms, because it is expressed in terms of such fundamental pictorial elements as line, shape, color, and tone. We may say that abstractionism aims at the expression of the richest Tao by means of the purest nature. Thus, when external objects are removed from (or transformed on) the canvas of painting, both the artist and the spectator are left free to concentrate on intuitive activities and thus spared the distraction of any attempt at recognition. The Buddhist assertion that "Zen is freedom from distractions" is interpretative of the full concentration of art in general and abstract art in particular.

The average spectator is keen of (or merely accustomed to) eyesight, but slow at (or simply incapable of) psychic sight. His capacity for using the matter-of-fact, everyday eyesight seems, therefore, meaningless in the presence of a new art that demands of him the acumen of psychic sight. Accordingly he complains that there is no such sight in daily life. But then he seems unaware that neither in daily life are there such sounds as the composer hears in his score. One never hears, in a sonata or fugue, the sound of splashing cataracts, warbling birds, pounding surfs, or rustling leaves. Aesthetically, it is as legitimate to perceive beauty in absolute music as to enjoy beauty in abstract art. Why, then, shall we accept the former and reject the latter? If we agree with Emerson that "Beauty is its own excuse for being," we should accept abstract art solely on account of its beauty.

What the camera looks at, as a matter of fact, is not what we are used to taking in. Shrink or magnify an object, and you will see abstract shapes and images. The constellations as seen through the 200-inch observatory telescope or the kaleidoscopic sight of bacteria and texture of metal and wood at the other end of a microscope are wonders of nature the like of which our naked eye never dreams of seeing.

To paint as metaphysically and intuitively as do the Fifth Moon painters is to create in the spirit of CLAIRVOYANCISM. Clairvoyance, according to the lexicographer, is "the act or power of discerning objects not present to the senses but regarded as having objective reality." Another definition says it is the "ability to perceive things out of the range of ordinary perception." In French, "clair" means "clear" and "voyance" means "seeing." I call the creative process of abstract painting CLAIRVOYANCISM, because it is the contemplation in which the ego of the artist is able to know Tao. "Clarity" is the illuminated state in which "I" and "Tao" are in perfect harmony, while "Seeing" is the action that connects "I" and "Nature". Such a creative process marks the dualism in philosophy.

Metaphysics in China is founded on the dual forces of "Yin" and "Yang" (the negative and the positive, the female and the male, the dark and the light forces). "Yin and Yang matched makes perfect Tao"; thus philosophized I Ching. The metaphysics of Lao Tzu is essentially dualistic in nature and paradoxical in presentation. To him, something and nothing, increase and decrease, growth and decay, are only changing phases of Tao. "Tao Te Ching," Chapter 42 says, "Everything in nature carries Yin on its back and holds Yang in its arms." To paint in black so as to leave ample white unpainted has been more and more manifest in a formal tendency of the recent works of the Fifth Moon painters. This may be interpreted in terms of CLAIRVOYANCISM as viewing the infinite from the finite and holding something in the presence of nothing. Lao Tzu is even more relevant when he says in "Tao Te Ching," Chapter 28:

He who knows the white but keeps to the black,  
Becomes the model of the world.  
He rests in enduring virtue  
And returns to the infinite.

Inheriting the traditional temperament of the Chinese, the Fifth Moon painters have been intuitively journeying towards the mysterious center of Chinese philosophy. Fully understanding that "the heavy is at the root of the light and the silent is the master of the noisy," they paint where they leave unpainted, commit where they omit, and thus realize the ideal of the Chinese artistic tradition in "reaching out beyond the reach of the brush."

## II

Modern art in the West does not seem to have fully noticed this point. Negative space there is in Western painting, but the blank on the canvas appears inorganic and does not react upon the positive space with its vastness and endlessness. The works of Pollock and Tobey are stuffed and blocked to the exclusion of any breathing space. Even on the canvases of Kline, Soulages, and Hartung is the blank lacerated by weighty and violent black bars and masses, and deprived of any possibility either to maintain a sense of the infinite or have communion with, or response to, the positive space. For instance, where the abstract expression of Kline is a process of commission, that of Liu Kuo-sung is one of omission; where Kline is self-expressive, Fong Chung-ray is self-contained.

The Fifth Moon painters have freed themselves from the realistic aspects of Chinese painting and in so doing have come closer and closer, in a transcendental way, to the essence of the Chinese tradition. Gradually they are drawn to abstract expression in black (at least in monochrome akin to black) and to defining the white space when they merely paint the black. Black, to Renoir, is "the queen of colors.". The point is fully realized by such painters as Mi Fei, Shih T'ao, Pa Ta Shan-jen, and Ch'i Pai-shih, who of all masters of Chinese painting have attained conciseness and simplicity of abstract expression.<sup>1</sup> To me, Matisse's rhythmical play in ink is even more appealing than his polychromatic arrangements. If black is the queen of colors, white, then, must be the mother of all forms, for black is still a commission and white is sheer nothingness. It should be held as the supreme achievement of Chinese painting to be capable of reaching the most primordial of forms and at the same time contemplating the purest of the formless.

Let us now make a brief appraisal of modern Western painting in the belief of the Fifth Moon painters. To re-evaluate Chinese tradition in painting and enhance it, a comprehensive orientation in Western art is an indispensable condition. Yet it must remain a condition only and not an end in itself. Our purpose is to carry on the Chinese tradition and anticipate future developments. It has been very unfortunate to refer to recent Chinese painting either as "Western painting" or as "Eastern (Japanese) painting," because this is to mistake the means for the end. Imitation of nature results in losing the "Tao"; imitation of the masters, in losing "Myself." It is time for contemporary Chinese painters to get out of the sloughs of Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism.

Among the masters of abstractionism, Mondrian errs on the cold intellectual side, and so do the various schools that are derived from him or have a parallel development—Purism, Constructivism, Suprematism, and Spatialism. These have shown a

tendency towards technological and architectural designs and allow little room for the free play of imagination. On the other side, Kandinsky is found to be disconcertingly romantic and complicated. So are Futurism, Vorticism, and Orphism—schools of painting bent on capturing a dynamic world.

To us, classic restraint and balance should be a spontaneous overflow of the soul rather than mechanical confinement. The austere in art willingly accept Plato's aphorism that God always geometrizes, but art as it is at once intellectual and sensuous. It is neither the geometry of the Purists nor yet the dynamics of the Futurists. Geometric Abstractionism has produced few great artists. The works of Ozenfant, Le Corbusier, and Malevitch are too intellectual and are more architecture than painting. *White Square on a White Background* by Malevitch, for instance, in reaching the logical conclusion of abstract reasoning, has deprived the artist of individuality. Comparing the constructions of these painter-geometers with the works of Klee, Miro, or Arp, it immediately becomes obvious that the former is static and inorganic and the latter, rhythmic and animate. Formalism in modern Western painting reaches its impasse in the accelerated development from Cézanne's "cylinder, cone, and sphere" to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque and from Cubism to Geometric Abstractionism.

Nor are we satisfied with kaleidoscopic extravagance in color and form since the Fauves. Futurism may be called "mechanical Romanticism" in that traditional Romanticism is agricultural but Futurism is industrial. To us, the Futurists' idolatry of war and annihilation is downright shamelessness. Thus had written F. T. Marinetti in "Futurist Manifesto" long before Mussolini barked his blasphemy over the radio:

We will glorify War, the only Health-Giver of the world,  
Militarism, Patriotism, the Destructive Art of the Anarchist,  
Ideas that Kill, Contempt for Women...Fire the libraries!  
Turn the flood into the museum—let the famous pictures  
float! We cast our Challenge to the Stars!

It is only too natural that later on Marinetti should work in the cause of Fascism as did Ezra Pound. Futurism owes much to Cubist formalism, but, dissatisfied with its still life, seeks to plunge it into a dynamic world. To capture the continuity and speed of motion, the Futurists exhaust themselves to compete with the movie. Accordingly, they painted ten-hipped nudes, hundred-footed dogs, and thousand-wheeled trains, in vain trying to catch the four-dimensional within the limitations of the two-dimensional.

A bridge between Cézanne and almost all the other schools in modern Western painting, Cubism even influences such schools as strongly object to the Cubist emphasis on intellect. Essentially, Cubism is classical, rational, contemplative, and disciplined. There came a desperate reaction from the artists in the general disillusionment and nihilism of the First World War. Rebels against reason, morality, society, and aesthetics, the Dadaists ushered in the world of dreams, of free association of the unconscious, and, finally Surrealism. Theirs is a world of isolated, private experiences where reason is suppressed to the minimum to allow maximum free play of the libido and where the artist's sense of isolation is sharpened as it has never been sharpened before. Surrealism has been termed "organized chaos." Paradoxically, while they make it their credo to have nothing but absolute freedom in association, the Surrealists consciously exploit the unconscious and make deliberate pictorial arrangements to shock the spectators. Under the influence of Giorgio de Chirico, they reacted against Cubism

in recovering traditional perspective and breaking the Cubist plane as well as chromatic monotony. Through perspective and chiaroscuro, individual objects or detailed sections of a Surrealist painting often appear vividly realistic, but the overall atmosphere remains dreamy and unreal. It is on the nightmare of reality that Surrealism is founded. The satiated spectator is in turn attracted by its curiosity of presentation and luxury of details, and repulsed by its acrobatic mannerism and hide-and-seek escapades and pantomimes that strain the nerves but do not hold the soul. The exhibitionism of some of Dalí's works, once seen through, collapses like a dissolving magic.

Often, Surrealism is practiced more to its credit by such unorthodox Surrealists as Klee, Miro, Picasso, and Chagall than by the orthodox Surrealists. Only very few great painters will survive the dust of time, the mist of fashion, and the colorful fallen petals of withering isms. The greater a painter proves, the more difficult it is to dismiss him with a rough-and-ready classification. Are Picasso, Matisse, and Klee readily classifiable? Isms and schools, indeed, are but unfortunate misnomers that are aureoles that glorify minor artists but worn-out caps that ill become the masters.

CLAIRVOYANCISM is also a cap. Whether it will prove too big or too small depends upon the future growth of the Fifth Moon painters. The three types of modern Western painting are, more or less, affirmatively or negatively, but self-adjusted aesthetic attitudes of Western painters to the aggressive development of science and industrialism. The Purists accept it only passively. The Futurists follow it actively. The Surrealists run away from it nervously,

CLAIRVOYANCISM tries to continue the Chinese tradition on its return to the Orient after having had its schooling in modern Western art. It exists above and in spite of Industrialism which it neither courts nor spurns. It is neither Geometric Abstractionism nor Abstract Expressionism. It is dualistic in approach and classic in spirit. After all these hustle-bustles, how re-assuring is the classic steadiness and serenity! Yet such classicism as we profess is not the removal of force, but its restraint, nor is it the slackening of life, but its consolidation. Resting like a pond and towering like a peak, we observe and, above observation, contemplate, imagine and, beyond imagination, speculate. Our ideal work is not a momentary outburst, but an eternal crystallization, and not a chaotic wild goose chase, but an orderly architecture.

We hold in contempt the rumor that abstract art is declining in the West. Style of artistic expression, abstract or nonabstract, depends upon the intrinsic need of the artist and faithfully reflects his aesthetic belief. It is neither the perfume of Paris nor the coiffure of New York. It is forever ours so long as we adopt it honestly and successfully. So long as we live here and create, here is China, here is the Orient, here is the whole world.

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<sup>1</sup> [These figures are, respectively, Mi Fu (1051-1107), Shitao (1642-1707), Bada Shanren (1626-1705), and Qi Baishi (1864-1957), also mentioned elsewhere in this Reader.]

*Sun and Moon: Floating? Sinking?, 1970*

Ink and color on paper

22.52 × 37.09 in (57.2 × 94.2 cm)

British Museum, London



I FIRST MET THE MEMBERS of the Fifth Moon Group in the early days of 1964, during my first visit to Taiwan. Surrounded by some of their works on the walls, they struck me as a group of very congenial, lively, and serious-minded artists, highly articulate in their ideas and expressions and eager to learn about the latest developments abroad. All of them were young, energetic, and hard-working. What impressed me most in my brief encounter with them was their strong sense of purpose. They were concerned with the future of Chinese art and culture, and they felt that it was their mission to do something about them.

Having come to know them further through frequent correspondences and through personal contacts, I have become more and more convinced of their ideas and their directions. These have been borne out by two developments. Whereas in the early days their works did not attract many sympathetic eyes, they have now drawn attention from all over the world as the foremost avant-garde paintings of Taiwan. At the same time, the artists in this group have received high praise and recognition from some of the most serious critics in America and Europe. In this perspective, these developments are good indications of the achievement of the Fifth Moon Group.

The background among the members of this group is quite similar. All born on the mainland, they grew up during the turbulent years of the Sino-Japanese War. In their childhood or in their youth, they were refugees moving around in China; they experienced great hardship and suffering, and saw the country in struggle and change. Having migrated from the mainland in their teens or early twenties, they matured in the new environment of Taiwan. Here, with the international outlook, they have drawn great inspiration from the art of America and Europe. All these have given them a greater perspective of and a deeper concern for the future of Chinese painting.

One of the distinguishing marks of the work of the Fifth Moon Group is their strong experimental spirit. Although they are well acquainted with traditional Chinese techniques of ink painting as well as the Western medium of oil on canvas, they have chosen to search in various directions for the best means to express themselves. Many of the techniques are quite unorthodox, either in China or in the West. For example, Fong Chung-ray, after working for some years in oil on canvas, began to return to the more traditional approach of ink and colors on paper. However, instead of using the standard brushes of various sizes, he painted with palm leaves bundled up in various ways. This resulted in some of the most spontaneous and startlingly fresh effects in some of his paintings. Similarly, Chen Ting-shih, after working for many years in both Chinese and Western media, recently made use of a local product of Taiwan, the sugar-cane board generally used as cheap building materials, to work on prints with monumental shapes and powerful relationships. Hu Chi-chung generally painted in

completely Western technique, but also experimented sometimes with ink and paper. Liu Kuo-sung has tried to explore all the possibilities of a kind of heavy-fibered paper, which he had to order specially from the paper mills. He painted sometimes on one side of the paper and sometimes on the other. Afterwards he pulled out the fibers from the paper, leaving some of the most exciting textures ever seen in art. All these experiments have brought them to some new ground seldom explored in Chinese painting.

However, this search for new techniques and new media is only a step in their attempt to find the proper means to express their feelings and ideas. Mere technical display will appear empty if the artist has nothing to say. But this is not the case with this group who always strive for formal excellence. After working for some time in their early paintings on traditional Chinese subjects and Western themes such as figures, still lives and landscapes, they gradually developed to the point where they began working on semi-abstract or pure abstract forms. They took delight in exploring the possibilities of ink tones. Although this has been a characteristic pursuit of traditional Chinese painting, the members of the Fifth Moon Group have broken some new ground, especially in Chen's and Liu's works. Similarly, in color combinations and contrasts, there is something new, especially in Fong's quiet and muted browns and blues. Again, some of their works are noted for their dark, rocky shapes, such as Chen's, or greenish antique forms, such as Han's, or vigorous and dramatic movements, such as Liu's. The advantage of working in abstract elements is the possibility of concentration on the formal aspects of painting. This is certainly one direction in which this group has achieved their new expression.

But behind these pure or semi-abstract shapes and colors there is always something that harks back to the great Chinese tradition. Most obvious are the shapes and lines of Han Hsiang-ning's works, which evoke in the Chinese mind the memories and images of ancient objects, such as bronze vessels and jades of Shang and Chou dynasties or the old coins of Han. Similarly, Chen Ting-shih's dark, angular shapes seem to remind us of the stone monuments in China, especially the Buddhist steles or tomb tiles that the Chinese often rendered in rubbings. On the other hand, Fong's paintings, with their palm-leaf effects, and their muted browns and blues, seem to give us images of trees and leaves, winds and rains, mists and clouds so typical of traditional Chinese painting. In Hu Chi-chung's works, whether they are oil paintings with dazzling color combinations or paper scrolls with dancing ink dots and lines, there seem to be always traces of traditional Chinese flower-and-bird paintings, with all their charming colors and delicate lines. And Liu Kuo-sung's powerful shapes often lead us back to the great tradition of mountains and rivers, waterfalls and gorges, snowy peaks and deep forests so typical of Chinese painting. To the Chinese eyes, these associations always make the paintings

richer and tie them back to the mainstream of Chinese literati painting.

Such combinations of formal excellence and traditional memories have always played a major role in the development of Chinese painting. It is interesting to recall that in the early days of their development, these artists were often attacked as rebels against the great Chinese artistic tradition. Now, looking back, we find that they are the creative artists who can absorb the best elements from the past, embrace the new feeling and sensibility of their own time, and achieve a new synthesis most characteristic of the modern culture. It is this kind of achievement that characterizes the work of such great artists in Chinese painting as Fan K'uan, Li Kung-lin, Ma Yüan, Chao Meng-fu, Ni Tsan, Shen Chou, Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, Wang Hui, Shih-t'ao and many others.

The Fifth Moon Group actually stands in an extremely crucial juncture in the history of Chinese painting. On the one hand, there is a long, uninterrupted development of more than 2000 years of Chinese painting behind them, with all the high points and great masters. To the less creative painters, this tradition can be a great burden, weighing them down to become mere imitators. On the other hand, this great tradition, like Chinese culture as a whole, has been facing one of the greatest challenges from the Western impact, from the realism and naturalism of the 19th century to all the modern movements of our own time. This attraction of Western culture has led to the adoption of many elements from Western art. However, many artists have found that either mere rejection or total acceptance of one or the other is no answer to the needs of modern Chinese painting. Rather, it is the ability to embrace all the outstanding elements of both Chinese and Western painting that seems to distinguish some of the leading painters of our time. The recent development of Chang Dai-chien toward an almost abstract, splashed-ink landscape is a good example.

The direction chosen by the artists of the Fifth Moon Group is typical of this kind of solution at this critical juncture in Chinese art. Realizing the predicament of modern China, they have found that mere adherence to traditional practice is not sufficient for them to embody their feeling and ideas in their works. They have tried to explore some new ground for their expression. It was this search that led them to become intensively interested in the art of Abstract Expressionism in both America and Europe. Although there was no painting of this school available for them to see in Taiwan, they found reproductions of their works in journals and catalogues. Perhaps more intuitively rather than intellectually, they discovered that the approaches of the Abstract Expressionists, such as Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and others, were very much in line with what they were looking for. Eventually, this discovery led to the realization that there was a great deal in common between traditional Chinese painting and modern Western art.

Such a discovery is perhaps one of the most significant developments of contemporary Chinese painting. Chinese culture is an endless source from which one can draw all kinds of ideas. But to many modern Chinese, this heritage has become sterile. Interestingly enough, close contact with the West has gradually made it possible for some Chinese to reevaluate the past with new eyes. It is in this connection that some of the modern ideas in the West, such as primitivism, expressionism, abstractionism, surrealism and some other trends, have been found to have their parallels in China's past. The indulgence in individual eccentricities, the

exploration of the inner mind, and the search for dreams and fantasies were part of the Chinese tradition in the 17th century. For the modern Chinese artists, it is only natural to draw from both the Chinese heritage and modern Western development to form a new powerful stream. This is the course that has been followed by the Fifth Moon Group.

It is in this sense that this group is both traditionalist and innovationist. They have bridged the gap between the past and present and between East and West. They represent a new breed of modern-minded Chinese artists who are aware of their great cultural heritage but feel the need to revitalize it with ideas from the West. Like modern China, which tries to adopt many Western elements without losing their own tradition, they attempt to synthesize both Chinese and Western art into a new expression. So far, they are well on their way toward this synthesis. It will be exciting to see how they will develop in the future.

Chu-tsing Li  
Lawrence, Kansas

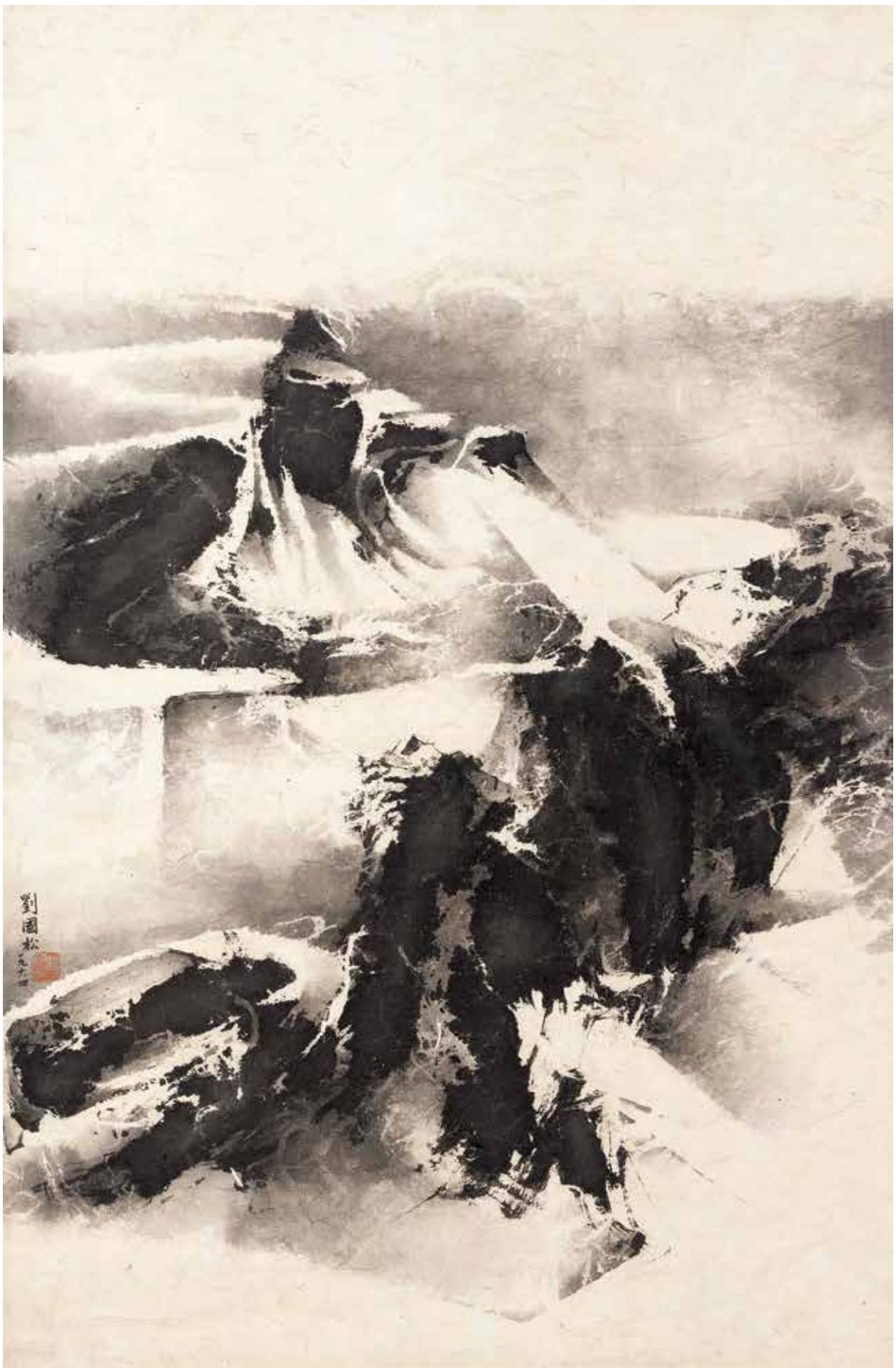
This article was first published in the exhibition catalogue *Five Chinese Painters* (Taipei: National Gallery of Art and Museum of History, 1964), 7-12.

*Wintry  
Mountain  
Covered in  
Snow, 1964*

Hanging scroll; ink  
and light color on  
fibrous paper, with  
artist's signature  
and seal

33 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{6}$  in  
(85.4 x 55.8 cm)

Harvard Art  
Museums/Arthur  
M. Sackler  
Museum,  
The Chu-tsing Li  
Collection,  
Gift of B U.K. Li  
in honor of  
Chu-tsing Li  
and in memory of  
Yao-wen Kwang Li  
and Teri Ho Li  
2013.159



**Thomas Lawton**

**THE INTERNATIONAL FIFTH MOON**

1964

**WHEN I FIRST MET** the members of the Fifth Moon Group, approximately five years ago, their exhibitions already were regarded as important events in the cultural life of Taipei. At that time, their work was most appreciated by a small group of avant-garde painters and members of the foreign community living in Taiwan. Announcement of an impending Fifth Moon exhibition inevitably evoked great interest and a friendly rivalry developed among admirers, who would then strive to obtain the finest examples of the artists' work. Fortunate indeed was the collector who was able to acquire representative examples of work by each member of the Group.

During the ensuing five years, the Fifth Moon Group has emerged as a truly international organization of artists. Several members of the Group enjoy an enviable popularity at home and abroad, having travelled widely both in the United States and Europe. Their paintings are represented in many American museums and private collections.

The members of the group are extremely articulate. Many of them have published articles in newspapers and magazines in an attempt to explain what they are striving to achieve in their work. These literary efforts have been of some help in educating the public, but ultimately the paintings must stand alone. It is a tribute to the evocative power and visual eloquence of their work that Fifth Moon Group exhibitions have been well received in all parts of the world.

Visual images in the paintings by these young artists working in Taiwan bespeak a new era in the history of Chinese art. For a time their work was regarded as somewhat regional, even parochial. But the period of their apprenticeship has passed and the individual artists are taking their rightful places on the international art stage. To the surprise of many who were unfamiliar with their work, these artists are receiving enthusiastic approval. But to the small coterie of admirers who have long championed their cause, this new success is a fitting conclusion to their long, painstaking struggle to achieve acceptance and understanding of their work, which is—paradoxically enough—a development from essentially traditional beginnings.

The advent of a Fifth Moon Group exhibition can no longer be regarded as a purely local event. The members of the Group must now be regarded, in truth, as artists of the International Fifth Moon.

This article was previously published in the exhibition catalogue *Five Chinese Painters* (Taipei: National Gallery of Art and Museum of History, 1964), 25–26.

Liu Kuo-sung

THE PAINTER AND HIS MODEL

1965

FROM JANUARY 15 to February 15, 1964, an exhibition of sixty-eight recent paintings by Picasso was held at the Galerie Louise Leiris, next to the Parc Monceau in the northern section of Paris. These oil paintings were all new works created over a period of one and half years, from early 1962 through June 1963. From the exhibition catalogue, we can see that thirty-eight of these new works, comprising over half of all the featured paintings, are titled *Painter and His Model* (see photo).

On closer look, it is not difficult to discover that the compositional arrangements of all thirty-eight works called *Painter and His Model* are nearly identical. The painter is positioned to the left of his canvas, and the model to the right. In most cases the background setting is in the artist's studio, although a few are set in a courtyard. Without exception, the central point of each painting is occupied by an easel placed at an angle to the viewer, with the frame of the canvas effectively dividing the composition into two separate spheres, one occupied by the painter and the other by the model. Equally, in each composition the painter is depicted in profile, seated on a chair, holding his palette in his left hand and extending his right hand to paint on the canvas with vigorous energy.

The only notable differences among these works lie in the posture of the model and the expressive energy of the tableau. Moreover, by examining the other thirty works exhibited at the same time, we find that, apart from five works that borrow

heavily from the paintings *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* by Poussin and David;<sup>1</sup> two still lifes; and one landscape, the remaining twenty-two paintings also are related to this theme of "painter and model." Of these, six works show the artist in the act of painting, sixteen depict female figures either in the nude or clothed, and several others feature painters or models whose figures have been bisected. Following such an analysis of these works, some people would be likely to say: "Picasso has shut himself in his château over the past few years, isolated from the outside world, with only his models for daily company. This is why models comprise his main subject matter." While there may be some truth in this, a review of the body of work he painted over his lifetime reveals a similar story to that of this exhibition. In fact, grouped by theme, we will find that there are relatively few works that fall outside of "the painter and his model" category, clearly demonstrating the importance of the model in Picasso's artistic life, and even beyond it. Apart from holding a key position in his art, the model occupies significant time and space in his personal life as well. If there are any doubts about this statement, let us take a journey through his past.

The first model to have had a personal relationship with Picasso was Fernande Olivier. This was in 1906, when Picasso was twenty-five years old, and experiencing a difficult time in his life after moving to Paris. After the two started living together in Montmartre that year, Picasso's soul was uplifted by a sense of



FIG. 1 Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)  
*Painter and His Model*, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 51.2 x 76.77 in  
(130 x 195 cm)  
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte  
Reina Sofía, AS02035  
Credit: Photographic Archives Museo  
Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

infinite hope and well-being. The warmth infusing both his spiritual and emotional life brought about changes in his painting style. After more than three years painting the bleak and despairing works of his “blue period,” he had entered into his “rose period;” gradually, the cold blues of his canvases gave way to an infusion of pink shades, symbolizing his state of happiness. The masterpieces of this period, including *Famille d'Arlequin*, *La Toilette*, and *Les Saltimbanques* all feature [Fernande Olivier] as the model. The two continued to live together until World War I, but sadly broke off their relationship in 1918. For over twelve years, Olivier had been the source of unlimited creative inspiration for Picasso. Picasso's most brilliant creative work—including his Cubist period, now past—occurred during this most unforgettable period of Picasso's life, enriching both his private life and his artistic sensibility.

But, if Olivier was so important in Picasso's life, why then did he leave her? The simple reason was the intervention of a third party. In the last year they lived together, although Olivier still gave him great artistic satisfaction, her image in his inner heart began to waver and grow dimmer day by day. It was during this time that Picasso became actively involved in the ballet world, and by chance met the popular ballerina Olga Khokhlova. Their mutual attraction proved irresistible, and they entered into a romantic liaison. In 1918, they made their relationship official and the two were married, with Khokhlova naturally filling the vacuum left by Olivier. It was not long before Khokhlova bore Picasso a son (he was now in his forties). At this time Picasso's painting style had already gone beyond Cubism and shifted to his Neoclassical period, as can be seen in the luminous clarity of the imagery in paintings he created during this time, using Khokhlova as his model. These include *Woman in White* and *Women Bathing*. His later work *Girl Before a Mirror* is also in this vein.<sup>2</sup> Presently, Khokhlova gave birth to a daughter, despite she and Picasso already having been separated for a period of time. Their children were unable to heal the growing emotional rift between them, and their marriage ended in divorce in 1936. Yet it wasn't long before Picasso took on a new lover, Marie-Thérèse [sic] who ultimately became his third wife.<sup>3</sup> Picasso was deeply inspired by her physique and manner, and represented her in many different configurations and expressive modes, painting numerous portraits of his newest love. These paintings were first made public in the book *Picasso's Picassos*, published when Picasso was eighty years old.<sup>4</sup> Previously, a number of painters engaged in the study of Picasso believed that during the year 1936, when he and Kholkhova divorced [sic], Picasso had not created a single painting. This view has now been definitively disproved.

Yet, during the period when Picasso and Thérèse lived together, there appeared on his canvases the bleak figure of a woman that evoked a quality of madness. But as to the identity of this woman, the famous photographer Duncan, author of the book *Picasso's Picassos*, has chosen to remain silent.

It appears that the relationship between Thérèse and Picasso was not fated to endure for very long. By 1939, a Miss Dora Maar was already making her appearance on Picasso's canvases.

Maar was a very beautiful woman. In paintings created by Picasso between 1941 and 1942, her facial features appear in many different arrangements, marking a return to the former Cubist style of his portraits of Olivier, and serving as a way of revisiting that glorious period of his life. Because his feelings for Maar were founded on the spectral memory of the departed Olivier, it wasn't

long before they too separated. But when this “dark girl” left Picasso, she said furiously: “I haven't been sharing a life with a person, I've been cohabiting with a gravestone!”<sup>5</sup>

How could an artist like Picasso, who will never completely forsake the natural form, exist without his model? At the same time, he expects each of his models to become deeply integrated into his life. After Picasso divorced Khokhlova, despite meeting two or three beautiful girls who were able to fulfill his artistic needs, there was always a distance between them; they were unable to integrate into his life, to meld with him as one. Thus, after Marr had left him in a rage, his search for the right model was a difficult one. For a celebrated artist like Picasso, finding a model in itself presented no problem, particularly in such an open-minded European society! The problem was that Picasso himself was not easily satisfied. After living alone for a significant period of time, in 1954 he finally found the right person in Jaclyn, now his wife. They lived together from 1954 until March 1961, when they secretly married in Villauris, a small city in the southern French Riviera. At that time, Picasso said proudly: “I made a promise to her that we wouldn't encounter a single journalist, and I succeeded in keeping it.”

It seems that Jaclyn, this 38-year-old, brown-haired beauty, has the charming ability not only to satisfy the artistic demands of the aging artist, but also to help achieve a state of harmony in their private life. Among the numerous works in his personal collection that have not been made public, there are many which were inspired by her. Has Picasso been able to maintain the deep and heartfelt joy of their situation? Alas, although initially kept secret, news of their marriage inevitably became public knowledge.

In the past, almost all the women who had relationships with Picasso started out as his model. But I believe that Jaclyn will be the last woman in his life.

(Translation by Valerie C. Doran)

This article was previously published in Chinese as “Huajia yu mote'er,” *Wenxing (Apollo)* 87 (January 1965): 37-38.

## Notes

- [While both Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and Jean-Jacques David (1748–1845) painted works on the theme of the abduction of the Sabine women, it is Poussin's work dated ca. 1633–34 that is titled *Abduction of The Sabine Women*, as Liu writes here; while David's 1799 painting is *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*.]
- [Though Liu includes the 1932 work *Girl Before a Mirror* in this discussion of Picasso's Neoclassical period and relationship with Kholkhova, the model for *Girl Before a Mirror* was Marie-Therese Walter; the style of this work is characterized as a fusion between Picasso's Cubist and Surrealist periods.]
- [Contrary to Liu's belief that Walter succeeded Kholkhova as Picasso's love interest, Picasso was involved with Walter as early as 1927.]
- [The book *Picasso's Picassos*, mentioned here by Liu, is a collection of intimate photographs of Picasso at home with his family and at work in his studio, taken over a number of years by photojournalist David Douglas Duncan, a friend of Picasso's since 1956. Over his lifetime, Duncan published several photo books on the artist. *Picasso's Picassos*, the earliest of these, was published in 1961, and Liu is correct in saying that at the time of its publication Picasso was 80 years old. However Liu's comment that Picasso's paintings of Marie-Thérèse Walter were first revealed in this book is incorrect. Portraits by Picasso of Walter were shown as early as 1932, during the first full Picasso retrospective at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris.]
- [Liu's quote of this alleged statement by Maar, rendered in Chinese, is: “我不是和一個人共同生活，而是和一座墓碑住在一起。” As of this printing the editors have been unsuccessful in locating the original source of this quotation.]

**CHAN BUDDHIST AESTHETICS AND INK PAINTING —  
IMPRESSIONS OF A LECTURE BY MR. ZENG YU (EXCERPT)**  
1969

**ONE DAY AFTER** the official founding of the Ink Painting Society, we hosted our first academic presentation at Lishui Studio. [...] The invited presenter was Mr. Zeng Yu, an art historian who has lived in the Europe for two decades. The topic was "The Relationship Between Chan Buddhist Aesthetics and Modern Painting." Some fifty or sixty people were in attendance, packing the venue.

Mr. Zeng's original insights were well received by the entire audience. Here I wish to summarize the gist of his lecture for my readers. Mr. Zeng began by noting, with self-effacing humility, that since Chan Buddhism originally had no aesthetics, it was very challenging to distill its philosophical thought into distinct aesthetic concepts. But he said he would nonetheless make an attempt in order to seek instruction from the audience.

Mr. Zeng divided his presentation into two parts. The first part was a discussion of the differences between the formation of Chan Buddhist aesthetics and that of other schools of philosophical thought. The second part was a discussion, aided with lantern slides, of the philosophical backgrounds of paintings of various periods.

Mr. Zeng began by explaining the ontological outlook of various schools of philosophy and their influences on painting. According to him, ontology, or the study of the existential nature of the universe, may be broadly divided into the materialist and the idealist schools. Materialism holds that matter exists independently from, and indeed antecedent to, human consciousness, which is subsequent and subject to it; matter has a causative effect on the emergence of consciousness, which arises in response to it. Likewise, concepts are reflections of objective matter. In other words, all phenomena arise from the dynamic movement of matter.

Applied to artistic practice, materialism suggests that the development of art is determined by objective social factors, and that painting is a reflection of social and historical context. When the material environment changes, art should change in lockstep. In our industrialized society, we must faithfully and directly reflect its sophisticated material culture in painting. In sum, the materialist believes that human consciousness and all its intellectual workings are materially constituted and determined.

Diametrically opposed to materialism is idealism, which holds that the fundamental nature of the universe is mental. The mental world is that which truly exists, and the material world is only its superficial manifestation. To put this more explicitly: everything exists in subjective consciousness, and nothing exists outside consciousness. Thus "existence *is* consciousness." According to the idealist, reality is nothing other than existence in consciousness, or existence in the mind; material existence is nothing more than an expression of mental existence.

Applied to artistic practice, idealism has fostered the emergence of modernist expressionism. The expressionist artist manipulates objective matter and its properties according to his or her

free will in order to satisfy his or her spiritual needs. Lyrical abstract painting is an even more direct manifestation of idealism. Artistic expressionism disregards the industrialized state of our society and aspires towards a transcendental realm, a metaphysical and mental realm. Thus, idealism holds that the mind gives rise to matter, that all forms of material existence are due to cognition. The mind, alone capable of knowing the myriad things and mastering the universe, is the origin of all the dynamics of life and governs all that which moves, evolves, and progresses in society.

Between materialism and idealism is dualism, which holds that materialism fails to explain mental phenomena and that idealism fails to explain material phenomena. The dualist argues that mind and matter are fundamentally different, the former defined essentially by thought and the latter defined essentially by physical expanse—indeed mind and matter are absolute opposites to each other. Dualism explains material phenomena in material terms and mental phenomena in mental terms, seeming to avoid the contradiction between materialism and idealism.

The dualist believes that mind and matter are ontologically unrelated and thus can never interact with each other, advocating a parallelism between mind and matter. Yet, if mind and matter truly can never interact, how can human life, by definition a combination of both, be possible? And how can an artwork imbued with vitality be possible? Dualism has had zero influence on art because it cannot be expressed in artistic terms. Mr. Zeng emphasized that the dualistic parallelism between mind and matter is in effect a "nothingness" that denies both and an "emptiness" that cancels both, and is thus compatible with the Dao.

Chan Buddhism is distinct from all three schools of thought discussed above. With simplicity and directness as its central values, Chan Buddhism holds that Buddha nature is inherent in all humans and that one can achieve "sudden awakening" by simply recognizing Buddha nature within oneself. Chan Buddhism is utmost turbulence within quiescence, utmost quiescence within turbulence. It is a silent but constant illumination, a luminous but constant silence. Inseparable, quiescence and turbulence penetrate the origin of life. Quiescent contemplation and soaring life constitute the central motivating duality of art. They also constitute the mental state of Chan, which unifies the duality into a transcendental principle of mind and matter. Indeed, this is the principle of the "oneness of mind and matter" advocated by the Father of the Nation [Sun Yat-sen, 1866–1925], who once said, "All phenomena in the universe, however varied, are either mind or matter. While mind and matter are defined in opposition, they are indeed mutually enabling. In the past, before the advent of science, mind and matter were often regarded as absolutely separate. This was ignorant of their fundamental oneness." Mind and matter are only two aspects of the same entity. Without matter, mind cannot express itself or realize its aim. Without mind, matter

cannot manifest its meaning or value. The two are mutually enabling and interdependent. Without one, the other ceases to be.

The materialist, who emphasizes the form and medium of life and overlooks formless mind and spirit, is left with only the sufficient conditions of existence. The idealist, who emphasizes inner spirit and overlooks embodied existence, is left with only one aspect of the meaning of life. Unifying mind and matter, the classical Chinese worldview provides the only true principle for mastering the universe.

Chan Buddhism arose from the fusion of classical Chinese Confucian and Daoist philosophy and its subsequent encounter with Mahayana Buddhism. As an artistic expression of Chan Buddhist thought, Mr. Zeng pointed to *Splashed Ink Immortal* by Liang Kai of the Southern Song dynasty. The painting is at once mind and matter, at once void and solid, at once nothingness and existence, and at once classical and modern. Harmonizing these seeming contradictions into a coherent whole, Liang Kai achieved the Chan Buddhist state of the oneness of mind and matter.

Under the influence of Chan Buddhism, classical Chinese aesthetics developed many notions that likewise unify seeming contradictions. Take for example "study the Force of Transformation [i.e. nature] without, and obtain from the spring of the heart within" (*waishi zaohua, zhong de xinyuan*), wherein "Force of Transformation" refers to matter, and "spring of the heart" to mind. The phrase "sparse enough for a galloping horse, too dense for a breeze" (*shu neng zou ma, mi bu tou feng*) is an application of the Chan Buddhist state of mind on pictorial composition. In the creation of mindscape in Chinese landscape painting, one must be able to express both the intricate, meandering melancholy of Qu Yuan's poetry and the transcendent capaciousness of Zhuangzi's philosophy. The former quality motivates the passion to penetrate the myriad things of nature—what [Sikong Tu refers to as] "obtained within the encirclement." The latter quality allows [one to observe the world as] the moon in the mirror, as flowers reflected in water, as "an antelope that hangs by its horns and leaves no tracks to be found"—what [Sikong Tu refers to as] "transcending

the image." If a painting that achieves the status of a transcendent Chan Buddhist mindscape, Mr. Zeng suggested, then it necessarily appears as a landscape and not a landscape, with and without color—a paradoxical amalgamation of opposites, a union of mind and matter. He then went on to explicate various strands of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian thought and showed some 70 lantern slides of Chinese and Western paintings.

Finally, Mr. Zeng left the Ink Painting Society with the following poem by the Japanese Zen master Daichi Sokei (1290–1366):

Alone it towers above the white clouds.  
Who can help feeling the chill of the snowy vapors?  
Viewed from any angle, it has neither front nor back,  
But simply erupts from midair to catch people's eyes.<sup>1</sup>

For Mr. Zeng, this poem perfectly encapsulates "the current condition of the Ink Painting Society," whose establishment on the third anniversary of the Chinese Renaissance Movement is of tremendous significance. He said, "The Ink Painting Society may attract the scorn of those individuals who sway with the times, and its ultimate success will depend on you. Now that ink painting has received the undeniable attention of the international art world, I hope you will continue to persevere towards the goal of a true Chinese renaissance."

Mr. Zeng will soon return to Rome. We are grateful for his brilliant lecture, and even more so for his words of encouragement. I believe that his understanding of Western art must be profound, honed as it is by two decades of research and experience abroad. His encouragement of ink painters in Taiwan is relevant to all those artists who wish to contribute to the modernist movement. I have recorded his lecture in the hopes that it will spread far and wide among even those who could not be present in person.

(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

This article was previously published in Chinese as "Chanzong meixue yu shuimohua—Jishu Zeng Yu xiansheng bufen yanjiang," *Youshi wenyi* (Young Lions Magazine of Literature and the Arts) 29, no. 6 (December 1969): 29–32.

<sup>1</sup> [Translation adapted from Miyeko Murase and Shiye Liu, "Mount Fuji by Yokoi Kinkoku," <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/670934>]

#### *Eclipse*, 1971 (detail)

Ink and acrylic on paper

47.24 × 204.33 in (210 × 519 cm)

Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong



**Chu-tsing Li**

## **LIU KUO-SUNG: THE GROWTH OF A MODERN CHINESE ARTIST**

1969

The name of Liu Kuo-sung, in the minds of many people who have seen or collected his paintings, has been associated with dark patches of ink on big white cotton papers, sometimes with slight colors but always with those interesting white streaks that curve and turn, which evoke images of traditional Chinese landscape, such as clouds and mists, snow and water, mountains and peaks, waterfalls and cascades, trees and forests, streams and rivers; and of pure abstract patterns of light and dark areas, of painted lines and fiber streaks, and of ink patches and collages. In all of them, the world of nature and the world of pure form seem to have been skilfully blended together, moving, dramatic, and exciting. They have attracted many followers to journey with him, and his name is becoming well known to more and more people.

Behind the paintings is a personality and development of no less interest, unknown perhaps even to his admirers. A recent article by Liu called "Painting is a Very Difficult Journey," published in *Art World (I T'an)* deals with the artist's own early life and artistic development.<sup>1</sup> In it, the painter reveals that he is not only capable of expressing himself in ink and colors, but also in writing. He has impressed many people in Taiwan by his eloquent talks and lectures, and many others in various parts of the world by his persuasive ideas. As a person, he is always eager, friendly, earnest and generous.

Both his struggles to become a painter and his ideals in Chinese art have been presented by the artist himself in his writings, which are large in number, including two books and numerous articles which have appeared in many periodicals and newspapers in Taiwan and abroad. From these writings one can get a rather clear idea of what goes on in the mind of the painter. It is interesting to see the artist and his works through ideas found in these writings. Here a number of quotations from his writings are used as source materials in a discussion of his development.

### **Early Years: 1932–1951**

*From my childhood I was never a rich boy. When I was six years old, my father died on the battlefield while defending his country against the Japanese invasion. After that my mother, taking care of my sister and me, drifted from one place to another during the war years. I recall my having gone up to the mountains to gather firewood for the family and my mother's having worked for people to make ends meet. Sometimes we had to eat rotten rice soaked in salt water to survive starvation; at other times we shivered in the cold, weeping together, unable to sleep.<sup>2</sup>*

"Journey," p. 22

Born in Shantung, one of the northern provinces through which the Yellow River flows to the Yellow Sea, the artist grew up in the

turbulent years of recent Chinese history. In 1932, when Liu was born, China had already lost the north-eastern provinces, better known as Manchuria, to the Japanese, and had to face internal and external threats to her existence. In his childhood, he experienced the loss of his home and of his father, whom he remembers through his mother as a fearless fighter. After years of moving from one place to another during the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45, he was able to settle down in Wuch'ang, in the central part of China, to attend school.

*In the second year after the victory over Japan (1946), I was fourteen, attending the second year of junior high school (in Wuch'ang). Every day when I went to school I passed by two painting-mounting shops on my way. After school, I always spent a lot of time in those two shops, looking at the paintings they had on their walls. After some time, the owner of one of these shops began to ask me many questions. Having learned that I liked paintings but was too poor to afford the materials to paint, he gave me a considerable amount of used brushes and remnants of paper. After painting some at home, I showed him my works. He gave me a lot of instruction and advice and continued to supply me with paper and ink. I still recall that during that summer, I painted like mad every day....*

"Journey," p. 23

Circumstances such as that mentioned here were instrumental in bringing to the world of art a very interesting painter. Without them, he might have been forced to take up something else in order to make a living. But the generous and helpful mounter discovered the tremendous potential in this young man. With similar help from others, and with his own hard-boiled personality and tough determination, he was on his way to become a painter. This episode, one of his often-told experiences, remains vividly in his mind today.

Soon he was able to enroll in the famous school in Nanking specially set up for children orphaned when soldiers died for their country; then another political crisis took him to Taiwan in 1949. Alone, without any news from his mother and sister left on the mainland under Communist rule, he grew up in the new environment, having the school as his "home," and living a life of complete poverty. But as a teenager, he took all the difficulties with courage and strength. In those days in Taiwan, where several million mainlanders had moved to settle, having left their possessions, homes and relatives behind, such suffering was a common experience. In fact, this camaraderie gave the people their main strength to face all those difficult years under constant threat of invasion from the mainland, economic instability, and the effects of the Korean War. Eventually, such ordeals and hardships built up a tremendous self-confidence and strength in Liu Kuo-sung.

Although his artistic talent was probably shown at this time, no works from this period can be seen. Most of them were left on the mainland.

### Student Years: 1951–55

*During the summer after finishing my second year as a major in art at Taiwan Normal University, I began to develop a strong interest in Western painting. At the same time, I felt that there was a lack of vigor in Chinese painting. In order to restore this vitality, it had to be given some new nourishment and blood. Therefore I began to read some books on the history and theories of art, and concentrated all my attention on the study of Western painting.*

"Journey," p. 23

For a young student to have come to such a realization must have been a hard struggle, especially for someone who grew up in the great Chinese tradition. For more than a century, there has been a long string of intellectual debates in China about whether China should simply cling to tradition or turn completely to the West as a direction for the future. For many a young Chinese, dissatisfied with more than a century of defeats by foreign powers and humiliations in international relations, it was natural to turn to the West for new inspiration and ideas. For young artists or writers in Taiwan, this seems to have been the only logical course of development. Cut off from the mainland physically, they found the young culture in Taiwan not quite enough to satisfy their curiosity and naturally turned to the West, especially America, for new ideas. In a way, both the air and jet ages have brought America much closer, in terms of contacts and accessibility, than the China mainland to Taiwan.

While there are practically no Western paintings of any consequence for young Chinese artists to see and study in Taiwan, reproductions in magazines, journals, catalogues and other publications have had quite an effect on them. From these limited materials (for there has been only a very limited number of Western art books and periodicals available on the island, most of which are found in the U.S.I.S. libraries), eager young students would greedily absorb whatever Western approaches they were able to lay their hands on. A group of drawings and pictures done by Liu as a student at the university show the range of his techniques at that time, while still in a very strong academic atmosphere.

Chinese art schools have generally followed the patterns of art academies in Europe. Although the Art Department of Taiwan Normal University in which Liu studied was the highest center of art training on the island, its approaches still had academic overtones. As a young student, Liu started with drawing plaster casts of classical busts. The *Bust of a Greek Youth* (Fig. 1) done by Liu at the age of twenty in 1952, still in his freshman year as an art major, shows technique and craftsmanship, the first basic requirements of an artist. What is important is his ability to infuse the lifeless bust with a sense of inner feeling and expression. The modelling of the face and hair, the feeling of mass and solidity, and the strong contrast between light and dark, all reveal the talents of the young student.

One of the fortunate aspects of the training program in the Art Department was that all students were required to study both Western and Chinese painting. Drawing, life drawing, watercolor



FIG. 1  
Liu Kuo-sung  
*Bust of a Greek Youth*,  
1952  
Charcoal on paper,  
21.5 x 15.5 in  
(54.6 x 39.4 cm)

and oil painting made up the requirements for Western art, while painting of figures, flowers and birds, and landscapes, those for Chinese art. Teaching methods were different. In Chinese painting classes, students learned by copying and imitating samples of the professors' works, while in Western art classes, they drew and painted from objects: still life, figure, or landscape. As a young student, Liu Kuo-sung was fully exposed to all these training programs. Several examples of his paintings in Chinese technique, all done in brush and ink on paper, sometimes with Chinese colors, show his ability to absorb this Chinese tradition. The *Melon* of 1952 (Fig. 2) is a good example of his mastery in the Chinese *pai-miao*

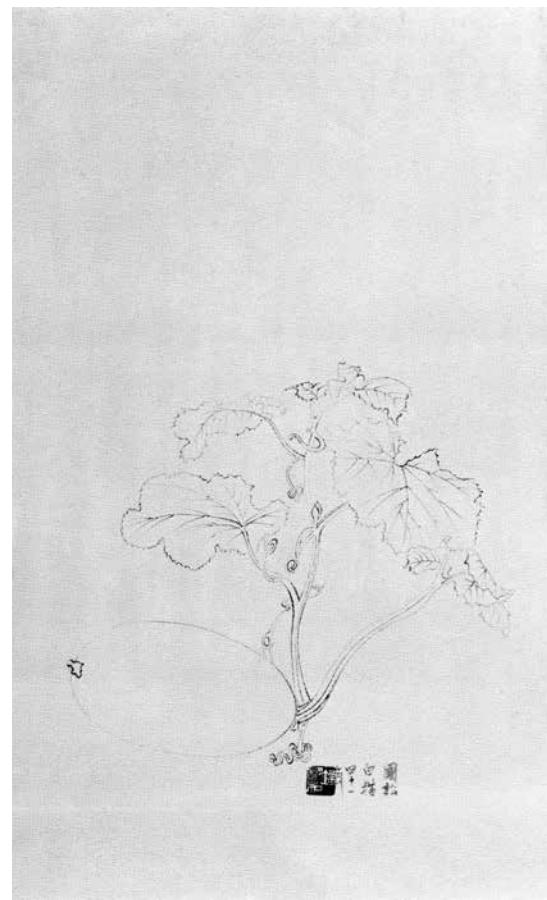


FIG. 2  
Liu Kuo-sung  
*Melon*, 1952  
Ink on paper,  
22.44 x 13.78 in  
(57 x 35 cm)



FIG. 3 Liu Kuo-sung, *Self Portrait*, 1954  
Watercolor, 15 x 10 in (38 x 25.5 cm). Private collection, Taiwan



FIG. 4 Liu Kuo-sung, *Still Life*, 1954  
Watercolor, 15 x 21.26 in (38 x 54 cm)

(white drawing) style. With a fine brush and thin ink line, the artist demonstrates his ability in the use of delicate and expressive lines. *Rocks with Pine Trees* of 1955 reveals how closely he learned the technique and style of his teacher, P'u Hsin-yü, brother of the late deposed emperor Hsuan-tung of the Ch'ing dynasty and one of the best known and most original painters in Taiwan at that time. Done by copying a model of the teacher, this was a standard work of class exercise. Both the tree form and the rock formation are executed with technical facility and fine taste, in the best tradition of Chinese literati painting. A third painting, a more fully developed landscape of his own, is the *Landscape* of 1955, which demonstrates his ability in assimilating the teacher's influence into a completely unified work of his own. Rock and tree formations still recall those of the previous work, but are now turned into something of his own. Even if he had only painted this, he would still have ranked as one of the most promising young painters in the last twenty years in Taiwan. Two major characteristics in this painting that persist in his later works are the strong sense of movement in his rocks and trees and the sharp contrast between these two types of objects.

In Western-style works, since he was unable to afford imported oil colors, Liu the young student first concentrated on watercolors. Naturally, Cézanne was a good model, probably through the interest of his teachers in that painter. In addition, this "father of modern painting" has had extensive influence among both Japanese and Chinese artists working in Western approaches. The *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 3) of 1953 again shows the early grasp of formal values in Cézanne's terms by Liu Kuo-sung, away from the pure representational treatment of his early drawing of the Greek bust. The parallels between the vertical post in the left background and his long neck (a touch of Modigliani), between the back of the chair and his shoulders, and between the slightly right-tipped head, the collar and shoulders, and the two arms, all show his mastery. The *Still Life* (Fig. 4) of 1954 reveals similar interest in this French painter. The skill in the arrangement of the relationship between the bottles, vases, and apples is again indicative of his attempt to exhaust the potentials of any tradition with which he came into contact.

Such assimilation and expression were carried on throughout his student years. The *Railway Tunnel* (Fig. 5) of 1954, which won the Purchase Prize of the Minister of Education in the "Concrete



FIG. 5 Liu Kuo-sung, *Railway Tunnel*, 1954  
Watercolor, 21.26 x 14.96 in (54 x 38 cm). Collection Ministry of Education, Taiwan



FIG. 6 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Rain*, 1954  
Watercolor, 21.26 x 14.96 in (54 x 38 cm)

"Image of Modern Painting" exhibition, resulted from combining his absorption of the Cézanne approach with his direct contact with nature. Based on an actual scene on famous Mt. Ali in central Taiwan, this watercolor is skilfully composed, depicting the railroad moving from the lower left towards the right before turning left again into the tunnel. His portrayal of the rocks and trees is a happy blending of both his Chinese training as shown in the three works mentioned above, and his Cézanne influence. This ability to synthesize very different elements from both East and West in Liu Kuo-sung was already showing.

The same happy union can also be seen in a very different watercolor of 1954, *The Rain* (Fig. 6). Departing from the more naturalistic treatment of the *Railway Tunnel*, he now takes on a more romantic strain. While the main interest in the latter is more in the formal values of the various objects depicted, that of the present painting is in its mood. There is no attempt to be very specific even in the foreground details. The whole effort is directed at the heightening of the mood by silhouetting the bare trees against the rain and mist and contrasting the smallness of man with the tallness of the trees.

Two still-lifes from the same period can serve as indications of his assimilation of both impressionism and fauvism. The *Impressionist Still Life* (Fig. 7) of 1954 is an attempt by Liu to achieve the oil effects of impressionist paintings in a watercolor by the use of large dots, although it is never so scientific as those works by such typical French Impressionists as Monet and Pissarro. The *Basket of Flowers* (Fig. 8) of the same year, using more of the watercolor technique, seems to have combined elements of both Cézanne and Matisse. Most noteworthy is his use of lines, which are free



FIG. 7 Liu Kuo-sung, *Impressionist Still Life*, 1954  
Watercolor, 21.06 x 14.96 in (53.5 x 38 cm)



FIG. 8 Liu Kuo-sung, *Basket of Flowers*, 1954  
Watercolor, 21.06 x 14.96 in (53.5 x 38 cm)

and sure, creating the same easy and pleasant feeling as those of Matisse. The Matisse influence can more clearly be seen in an oil painting done in 1955, *Nude* (Fig. 9), in which he tried to capture the relaxed and spontaneous line quality of the French master. However, in all of these, there was some attempt on his part at individualism, although at this stage of his development he did not carry it to its logical conclusion, probably realizing that such an eclectic approach had its limitations.

As a reflection of his effort to synthesize all the different ideas he received as a student at the Taiwan Normal University art department, a watercolor, *Landscape near Keelung* (Fig. 10), done in 1956 not long after his graduation (when, following the requirements of the university, he had to render one year of service teaching in a high school for the support he had received during his four years as a student), exhibits a major attempt to achieve a personal style. The composition, dominated by a series of mountains that parallels

the picture plane, still has some of the Cézannesque overtone, but it is also a typically Chinese organization, especially where the mountains are contrasted with the high cliff at the left. In brushwork, it is also an attempt to blend elements of East and West. Although the painting is done in watercolor, not in Chinese ink, the brushwork is based on his Chinese training under P'u Hsin-yü, but is less precise and clearcut, more relaxed and free in the Cézanne and Matisse approach together with the dots of impressionism. Again at this stage of his development, some of the characteristics that distinguish his later works can be seen—the high contrast of light and dark, the strong sense of movement in landscape, and the deep interest in textures, whether in dots, lines or surfaces. Just fresh from school, he had mastered the technique, form, and various means of expression he had learned from the university, and was attempting to blend all the complex elements into a more unified style that could be called his own.



FIG. 9 Liu Kuo-sung, *Nude*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 24.41 x 19.3 in (62 x 49 cm)

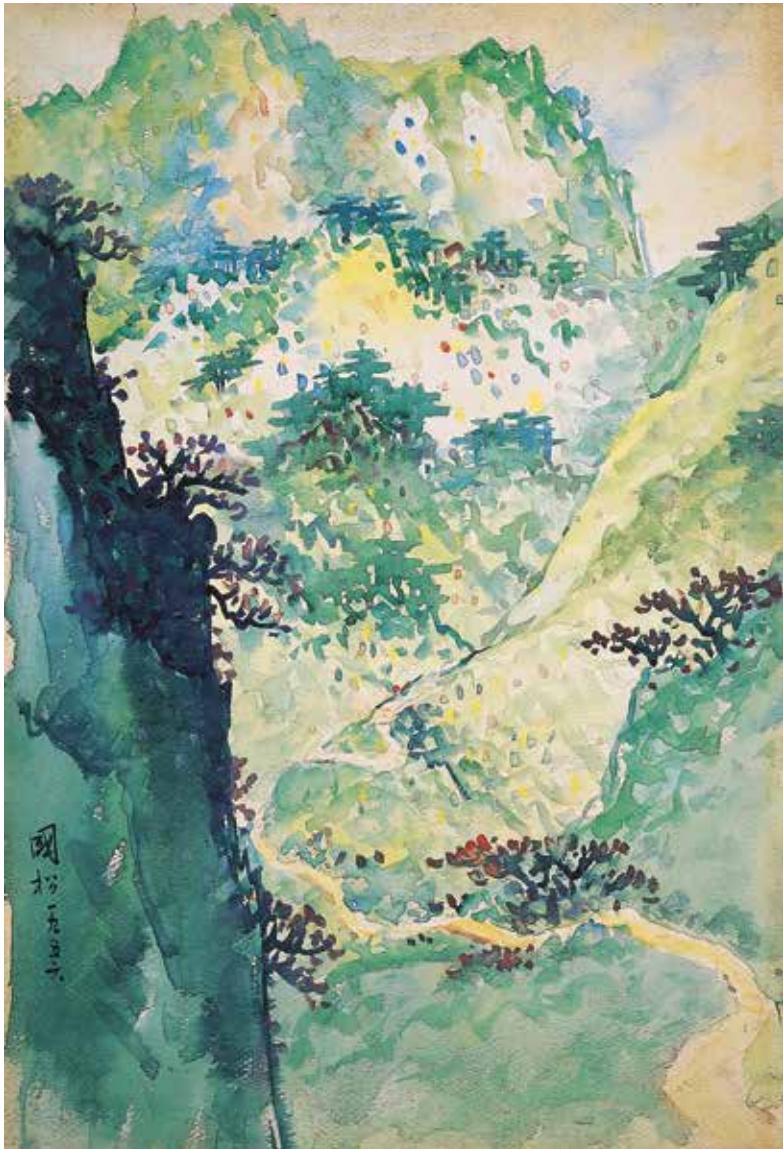


FIG. 10 Liu Kuo-sung, *Rear Mountain in Chi-Lung*, 1956  
Watercolor, 29.92 x 20.86 in (76 x 53 cm). Collection of Shandong Museum

## Early Experiments: 1955–60

*In the second year after my graduation..., the Fifth Moon Group was formed. That happened in 1956. Our first exhibition was held in May 1957....*

*There were several reasons and goals behind our founding of the Fifth Moon Group. The most important one was our dissatisfaction with the stagnant and lifeless situation of the art world at that time. As young graduates filled with vigor and idealism, we could not stand the dull and complacent atmosphere, and tried to stimulate the art world with our direct and sharp sensitivity, bold and spiritual power of expression, bustling vitality and young spirit, so that the long frozen creative power could be revived. To a certain extent, we started a new trend. The Tung-fang Art Association,<sup>3</sup> the Modern Print Association, and other art organizations all followed in their formation in promoting interest in modern Western painting. Thus, the modern art movements were brought to a high point since the transplantation of mainland culture to Taiwan. As a result, some new ideas, theories, and techniques were introduced. However, this development also led many young students of limited exposure to hold a mistaken idea that these new elements of our study were an end in themselves. In the end they tried to follow so closely the fashionable art trends in the West that they became captives of them. ... We felt we were partly to blame for this mistaken idea. For, at the beginning, we imitated many of the modern Western styles, such as fauvism, expressionism, cubism and surrealism. With our limited experience and knowledge, we thought that by imitating some "new" Western styles not yet known in China we were ahead of the others in novelty and modernity and criticized those of the traditional styles as lacking creative powers and new ideas. In this kind of ignorance and superficiality we worked for five years. Only after the third exhibition of the Fifth Moon Group in 1959 did I begin to realize the fault in this straight imitation of new Western movements and styles. I turned all these ideas over and over in my mind. This happened to be the time when I had to leave the crowded atmosphere of Taipei for the south to serve as an assistant at the National Ch'eng-kung University in Tainan. The quiet and lonesome atmosphere of the south gave me a good opportunity to ponder over these problems in perspective. There I gradually came to realize the importance of a national style—any creative painter could not stay away from, not to mention reject, his own tradition. This was the turning point in my ideas on painting. It was like the return of the prodigal son.*

"Journey," p. 24

In the modern period, almost all Chinese artists have had to go through a period of spiritual struggle. In fact, it is the problem of almost all intellectuals in all of Asia: There is the strong traditional influence and also the nearly irresistible Western impact. Those who resist outside influences are people who, perhaps, do not want to adjust to any new changes in the name of protecting their national heritage. Those who insist on adopting Western ideas have often been the ones fired by the exciting events which began with the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 and included many of the revolutions during the nineteenth century all over the world. These were the spiritual

ancestors of the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which overturned the Manchu government to establish a Western-style republic. In cultural development, Chinese intellectuals also became wholly preoccupied with all the "isms" of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and launched a revolutionary movement against traditional Chinese culture. in 1919. This was the famous "May 4th Movement," which is also called the "Chinese Literary Renaissance." Liu Kuo-sung's own reaction to this movement is clearly stated in one of his major essays in his book, *Whither Chinese Modern Painting*:

The May 4th Movement, led by a group of thinkers and literary men, was a great movement, with its influence still being felt today. Certainly the progress made by contemporary China in the fields of literature and science must be attributed to the success of the "May 4th." Although during the time of this movement Ts'ai Yüan-pei, one of the leaders, seriously pleaded, "Our cultural movement should not forget art," art, which played the key role in the Italian Renaissance, was forgotten. This is the main reason why the "May 4th" did not result in a "Chinese literary and artistic Renaissance." I make this statement not just to insist that in discussing a literary and artistic renaissance we must have our artists in the major role, but to remind our artists not to avoid their duties or look down on themselves. Our position is very important. We should not do the same as the earlier generation (of artists) who failed to make a response during the whole "May 4th" movement. Perhaps some people would complacently claim that the "May 4th" brought Western art to China. Yet in reality the task of introducing Western art to China left a lot to be desired. Artists of the "May 4th" generation were and still are imitators of Western styles of the nineteenth century or before. How can we take over the old forms of other peoples to serve as our new creation? (pp. 11-12).<sup>4</sup>

In the years after his graduation from Taiwan Normal University, he had various opportunities to meet many artists all over Taiwan. First he taught in a high school in Keelung for one year, during 1956-57. Then, following the compulsory military requirement of the government, he served for one year in the marines. Training and practice in the service took him to many parts of Taiwan. After his term of service, he returned to the school in Keelung for another year of art teaching until the summer of 1959, when he accepted the appointment as an assistant in the Department of Architecture at National Ch'eng-kung University in Tainan. Finally, after one year in Tainan, he was appointed as an instructor in the Department of Architecture at Chung-yuan College of Technology, in the suburbs of Taipei. This opportunity to move back to Taipei, the political, economic, as well as artistic center of Taiwan, was taken by him with great enthusiasm. During the last several years, he had come to know many artists in Keelung, Tainan, and other parts of the island. He had also been traveling to and from Taipei to work with members of the Fifth Moon Group and other friends. All these experiences gave him a greater perspective in thinking about national development and his own directions.

It was out of feelings such as that quoted above that he became anxious to follow in the footsteps of Western artists by forming art associations and publishing manifestoes. The situation was not unlike that which existed in the West during the early part of this century. Thus with a few classmates who shared similar ideas, he



**FIG. 11A** Liu Kuo-sung, *Memories of Childhood A*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 28.15 x 23.62 in (71.5 x 60 cm)  
Collection of United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC), Taiwan



**FIG. 11B** Liu Kuo-sung, *Memories of Childhood B*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 19.7 x 28.54 in (50 x 72.5 cm)

had formed the Fifth Moon Group not long after his graduation, and followed this move by beginning the work of rebuilding a Chinese modern art tradition. The course that he followed was very interesting and can best be understood in terms of his personal development during the years between 1956 and 1960.

In the first exhibition of the Fifth Moon Group in Taipei in 1957, he showed a number of his new "revolutionary" paintings, including the two *Memories of Childhood* and the *Still*

*Life*, all done in 1957. The two *Memories of Childhood* (Figs. 11a and 11b) were done as a pair, one lighter and the other darker; one horizontal and the other vertical. Both had the picture surface divided into many rectangular areas, each painted with images that came from childhood memories, such as birds and animals from the zoo and human figures from the theater and actual life. The idea of breaking away from single views in both traditional Chinese and Western paintings was a bold experiment for a Chinese. However, as he has indicated himself, such innovation was actually a straight borrowing from Paul Klee, Chagall and some other Western painters. Naturally, this was a stage that he had to go through in his attempt to find an answer to modern Chinese art. In the same way, *Still Life* shows the same indebtedness to the charm of Paul Klee. But technically he explored a considerable number of possibilities of the canvas. After covering the surface of the picture with thick paint, he broke up the surface into crackles, an idea that might have come from Chinese porcelains, and painted dark color from the other side of the canvas, so that the ink would seep through the crackles to make them appear darker.

During this period one of his major interests was Picasso. The more classical and intellectual approach of this Spanish painter may have served as a balance to the more intuitive and romantic direction of Paul Klee in Liu's own search for a personal means of expression. Naturally, the influence of Picasso came with many other figures of the School of Paris, such as Matisse, Braque, Jacques Villon, and Modigliani. In Liu's work this interest was reflected in two paintings with a strong emphasis on form, the *Still Life* of late 1957 (Fig. 12) and the *Nude Woman* of 1958. The former reduces all the objects of the still life to basic, more or less geometric shapes, all bound by heavy outline and painted with flat areas of colors, with an emphasis on composition and rhythmic patterns. This was a direct borrowing of Picasso's synthetic cubism, together with Matisse's work of the same period and Villon's later works. The *Nude Woman*, on the other hand, was developed from Picasso's neo-classical figures. A nude is painted again in heavy outlines with certain exaggerations, its curvilinear rhythm in sharp contrast to the strictly vertical-horizontal structure in the shallow background. Thus it captures the classical simplicity and balance found in the *Still Life*.

Another painting climaxed this attempt at absorbing the spirit of Picasso. *The Dance* (Fig. 13) painted in 1958, follows a two-figure theme, with a girl and her partner interlocked in a dancing pose. There is also a lot of mannerism in this picture: the mask-like faces, the sharply turned heads, the long necks, the twisted torso of the girl, the unnatural gestures of the arms and legs. Together with the almost flat background, they reflect elements of Picasso's works of the early 1920's, such as his dancers and neo-classical figures.

However, this Picassoid period in Liu's art came to an abrupt end during 1958. Part of the reason for the abandonment of this theme was the end of a love affair. His interest in Picasso and in the neo-classical style carried a certain kind of idealism that found expression in the formal pursuit of these paintings. Such an idealism came to an end with the loss of this love. Another reason behind the



FIG. 12 Liu Kuo-sung, *Still Life*, 1957

Oil on canvas, 13 x 17.9 in (33 x 45.5 cm)  
Collection of Shandong Museum

change was his discovery of the works of the abstract expressionists through periodicals and catalogues from America. By 1958 this art movement already had gained wide recognition in both America and Europe as the most exciting development in the art of the post-war period.

In a way, his interest in Paul Klee which began in 1957 also helped to pave the way for this new contact with abstract expressionism. In 1958 he moved forward from the *Memories of Childhood*, to experiment with greater freedom. The *Wind-etched Wall Painting* (Fig. 14) of 1958 shows a bold attempt in the elimination of colors and shapes and the concentration in lines scratched spontaneously on the plastered surface on the canvas. From this Klee-like approach he moved on to *War* (Fig. 15) of the same year, which was definitely a product of influences from the American abstract expressionists. On the surface of the canvas he dribbled layers of thick paint in streaks and patches of yellow-white and blue-black that reflect the conflicts and clashes of war. Obviously, both the technique and style of this painting were inspired by Jackson Pollock, whose influence was felt throughout the world during this period after his dramatic death in a violent car accident in 1956.

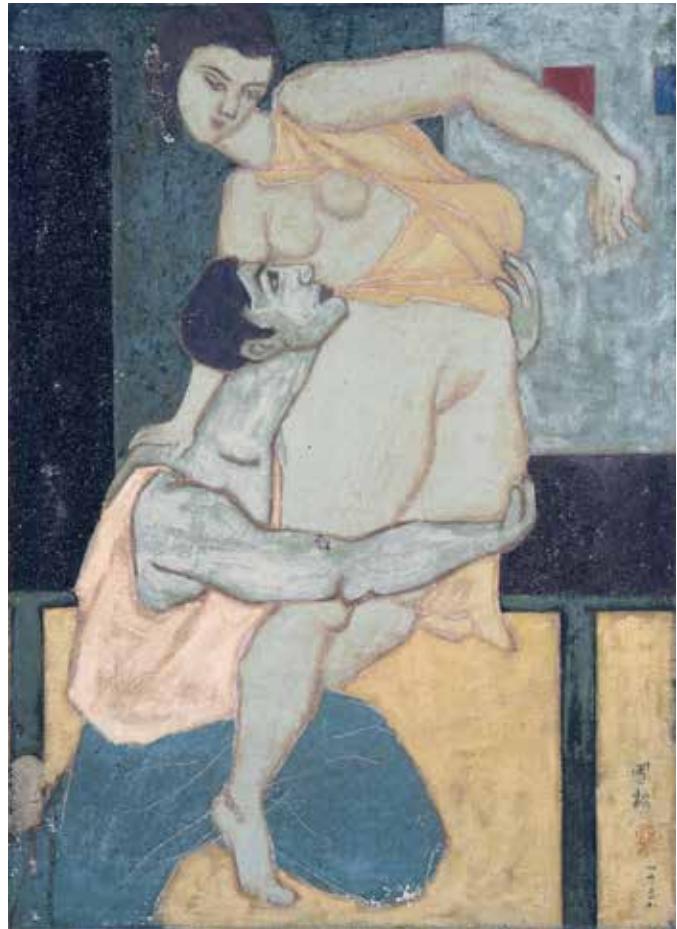


FIG. 13 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Dance*, 1958

Sand and oil on canvas, 31.5 x 25.6 in (80 x 65 cm)  
Private Collection, Taiwan

It was around this time that, having selectively absorbed a number of Western ideas that range from the late nineteenth century up to his own time, Liu Kuo-sung began to realize the fallacy of his innovations in the Western styles. While turning from the Chinese tradition was a decisive move away from the straight imitation of old masters and teachers, the following of modern Western painters was, to his agony, just as imitative



FIG. 14 Liu Kuo-sung, *Wind-etched Wall Painting*, 1958

Plaster and oil on canvas, 18 x 21 in (45.7 x 53.3 cm)

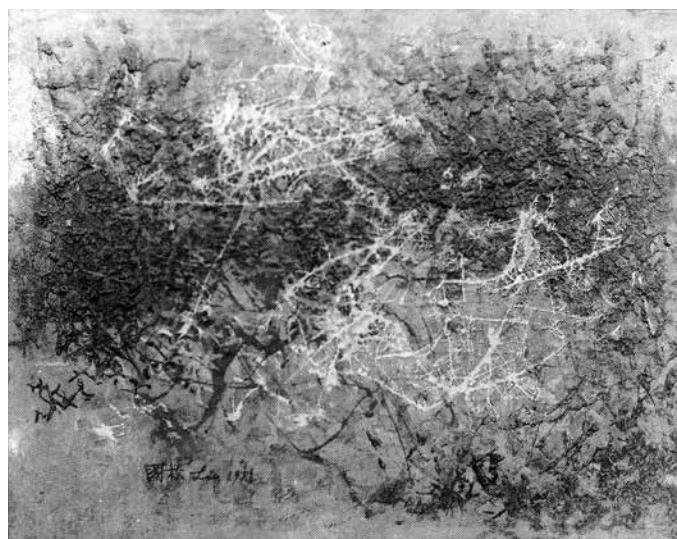


FIG. 15 Liu Kuo-sung, *War*, 1958

Oil on canvas, 14.9 x 18.1 in (38 x 46 cm)

and uncreative, as mentioned in the statement quoted above. It was after this discovery that he tried earnestly to search for something that could be called his own.

Yet this period of assimilation still played an important role in his general development. In those several years, even without any direct contact with real modern masterpieces of the West, he had gone through almost a century of the artistic experiences in Europe and America. He had tried to absorb the techniques and styles of the Impressionists, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Klee, Pollock; Kline and many others not illustrated, such as Braque and Ben Nicholson, and to express his own emotions and ideas through their pictorial languages. While being still basically imitative, he had been able to grasp the essence of their approaches. But, as was his experience with the Chinese tradition, he had found himself not wholly satisfied with expressing himself through other artists' mediums of expression. Here lay his decision to find his own way.

This assimilation was also valuable in definitely liberating him from the restrictions of traditional Chinese paintings. Now he had broad experience in not only Chinese ink painting, but also watercolor, collage, plastered surface, dribbling methods, automatic painting, and other graphic means. He thus had a whole store of possibilities to draw from, and only had to wait for the proper opportunities.

### First Breakthrough: 1959–61

*At that time, I firmly believed that the national character could be expressed only in spirit and not in materials and tools. In style and expression, I wanted to push the stagnant Chinese painting tradition forward and glorify it. Thus I began to use the canvas of Western painting as a vehicle for washes and splashes of ink. In this way I painted for two years, executing some of the largest works I had ever done. At this time I also talked with a close friend, a member of the Fifth Moon Group, about my way of thinking. At first he tried to argue with me, but after three nights of long conversations, he began to see my point....and began to paint ink style on canvas. At first he imitated Sung landscape paintings and turned them into abstract pieces, with very good results....* "Journey," pp. 24-25

The beginnings of this new direction lay in a number of works done in 1959 and 1960. On the canvas he would first place a layer of plaster, on which he used a number of techniques, including scratching the surface, applying colors, dribbling ink over certain areas, and wiping some of it out. The main goal in this new attempt was to combine the techniques of Jackson Pollock with the Chinese ink tradition. Instead of Pollock's oil surface, his plastered surface could absorb the ink and develop interesting textures. To him this was the logical solution of blending Western techniques with the Chinese media. *The World of Poetry* of 1959 was the very first step in this direction after a long period of experiments and searches. Without resorting to any representational elements, he developed quite interesting textures and movements on the plastered canvas.

Although the painting lacks a central focus, ink blobs in all their irregular shapes begin to play a major role, for they enliven the whole painting. In *I Came Here to Listen to the Heavenly Speeches* (Fig. 16) of 1960, the potentials of ink on plastered surface were



FIG. 16 Liu Kuo-sung, *I Came Here to Listen to the Heavenly Speeches*, 1960  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 32.3 x 16.53 in (82 x 42 cm). Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan

further explored. Between the two, the development was quite important. In the 1959 painting, the whole surface was worked over, in colors, scratches and inks, very much in the Western approach. On the other hand, the 1960 painting already showed his greater concentration on ink, leaving large areas of the surface more or less untouched. This is definitely a more Chinese approach to the picture surface. The use of ink, too, was becoming more important. Tonal variations, textural complexity and formal transformations all show his ability to explore the potentials of this new approach. In addition, the formats of both of these two paintings, one vertical and one horizontal, now took on a more Chinese look, at least in connection with hanging scrolls.

While this new direction was moving forward in Liu's art, an important event took place in Taiwan that had historical



FIG. 17 Liu Kuo-sung, *Red Cliffs*, 1961  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 64.95 x 36.22 in (167.5 x 92 cm)



FIG.18 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*, 1961  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 74 x 36.2 in (188 x 92 cm)



FIG. 19 Liu Kuo-sung, *Lofty Mount Lu*, 1961  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 74 x 36.22 in (188 x 92 cm)  
Collection of Art Institute of Chicago (AIC)

significance. Following the examples of cultural exchanges between nations after the Second World War, the Chinese government selected a group of art objects from the Palace Museum in Taichung for a touring exhibition to five cities in the United States during 1961-62, including Washington, New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. Following the practice of the first international exhibition of Chinese art held at the Burlington House in London during 1935-36, objects from the Palace Museum were shown in an exhibition before they left the country and after they had returned. The Chinese government exhibited these objects in Taipei in 1960. For the Chinese in Taiwan, this was a very special occasion. The objects at the Palace Museum had mostly been in storage for nearly thirty years, since they were shipped away from the palaces in Peiping during the early 1930's when the Japanese were planning to invade north China. During the war with Japan from 1937 to 1945, these objects were transferred, following the course of the war, from Nanking to Hankow, then to Changsha, and again to Tushan in Kweichow and Chungking and Loshan in Szechuan. After the war, no sooner had they been shipped back to Nanking than they were on the move again to Taiwan in the face of Communist military threats to the capital. Even after their arrival in Taiwan they were stored in Wufeng, on a hill side about half an hour by bus from the city of Taichung—thus still inaccessible to the general public. This exhibition of more than two hundred choice objects before their tour in America was a rare occasion, especially for the art lovers who had had almost no opportunity to see the great monuments of the Palace Museum up to that time.

This opportunity offered Liu Kuo-sung direct contact with the great works of the past. Like so many Chinese in Taipei at that time, he was filled with great enthusiasm for the masterpieces of

the great Chinese painters. The result of this contact can be seen in three paintings of 1961 all in huge format, in long and narrow rectangles, either vertical or horizontal—reminiscent of typical Chinese scrolls. They are canvas paintings with plastered surface painted with Chinese ink and some colors. The first was the *Red Cliffs* (Fig. 17), which might have been inspired by a handscroll of that title attributed to the painter Wu Yüan-chih of the twelfth century. Here, in a vertical format, ink drops and strips were applied on the light-colored plastered surface, the drippings creating some of the vertical movements suggestive of the high cliffs in Chinese landscape. Dots, which traditional Chinese painters use on mountains and rocks to indicate vegetation, are employed extensively here. On the almost purely abstract surface, vague shapes of certain mountains and cliffs seem to emerge. It was one of Liu's first successful attempts at absorbing the spirit of ancient Chinese masters and expressing it in modern Western technique.

The *Singing and Weeping Waterfall* (Fig. 18) shows an increasing tendency to develop along lines that come closer to the spirit of Chinese landscape painting. Instead of more vertical lines and dots, shapes of all kinds are used here, with a considerable suggestion of depth to evoke the feeling of a grand landscape. The inspiration for this painting seems to have been the *Early Spring* by Kuo Hsi of the eleventh century, which was also in the Palace Museum exhibition. Perhaps the most interesting work of this period was the *Lofty Mt. Lu* (Fig. 19), which took as its model a painting of that title in the same exhibition by Shen Chou, a fifteenth century painter. Here again, in a painting about seven feet high, he transformed the Ming master's rugged and powerful mountain forms into a marvellous formation of semi-abstract shapes which evoke the images of forests, trees, rocks, caves,

waterfalls, snow, mist, stalactites; and other forms in a grand symphony of landscape. The light and dark abstract elements create not only a strong sense of mysterious depth, but also a feeling for the variation of shapes and the transformations of nature. Up to this point, Liu had already achieved some kind of synthesis of both Chinese and Western traditions, capable of expressing the deep-rooted Chinese belief that nature is vast, changing, mysterious, and powerful. For the foremost Chinese artists of the past, their paintings captured a sense of oneness between external nature and the artist's own internal feelings. The painting is thus a "mind landscape." In this attempt, Liu Kuo-sung had already proved that he was capable of pulling together all his past experience, both technical and expressive, inspired by both Chinese and Western sources, into a single harmonious whole. He had worked hard to reach that point in theory, and now he had achieved it pictorially. That crucial year was 1961, at the age of thirty, just ten years after he had entered National Taiwan Normal University.

### Second Breakthrough: 1961–63

*Since I taught in the department of architecture, I had among my friends many professors of architecture and practicing architects. One day, when some of them were discussing and arguing about various problems of China's new architecture, one of their ideas struck me like a great revelation. They felt that in architecture, whatever materials one employed one must try to be true to the materials. That is to say, one must utilize and develop them to the utmost in terms of their special characteristics and avoid using them for other materials, for to force characteristics other than their own on them is simply falseness and cheating.*

*To me, this idea was true not only in architecture, but also in all forms of art. Thus I repeatedly asked myself: 'Are you also committing the same errors by using oil painting techniques to express the feeling of ink painting? Isn't this also faulty and cheating? If you want to broaden and cultivate the domain of ink painting and to develop it to a great tradition, why can't you paint in ink on paper instead of the more fashionable materials of oil painting?' Through repeated self-questioning, I finally decided to give up oil painting techniques and started working in ink on paper. That took place toward the end of 1961.*

*This change was not an easy task. To give up the oil painting technique I had already mastered, to pick up again the ink-on-paper medium that I had not used for seven years, and to try to build a truly personal direction and new style in this latter approach, was a very, very difficult job. In all, I spent more than two years searching and pursuing the solution. In order to create a new image and to achieve a new expression, I had to look for new materials. I visited many paper shops in Taipei, looking for various kinds of paper for my experiments. Those were the most difficult and painful days in my entire painting career.*

"Journey," p. 25

In Taiwan, for a graduate of the Art Department in the Normal University, there were only very limited opportunities. In the first place, because of the nature of the university itself and of the

government subsidy to its students, all graduates are required to render one year's teaching service, usually in high schools, before they are free to choose any other kind of job. One of the best jobs for an art major is to teach in colleges or universities. However, there were very few teaching positions of this kind in Taiwan, for there is only one art department among all the institutions of higher education besides those in art colleges. Even as the foremost student in his graduating class of 1956, he found no college teaching jobs waiting for him. Thus when, in 1959, there was an opening for an assistantship in the Department of Architecture at National Ch'eng-kung University in Tainan, in the southern part of the island, he eagerly applied for it and was accepted for the job. After one year, he received an offer for an instructorship from the Chung-yüan College of Technology near Taipei. Since he wanted very much to be back in Taipei, where many of his friends were and where there was more happening in art, he gladly accepted it. This is the position that he still holds, although the rank has been changed to associate professorship.

As indicated in his statement, one of the greatest results of his being a member of an architectural department was the absorption of many ideas from that field, some of which may be applied to art. The idea of being true to the materials is one of the foundation stones of modern architecture. For Liu Kuo-sung, once hit by this idea, struggled with and worked over it and finally became convinced that he must go back to paint with the materials of the ink tradition.

At first he experimented in the tradition of Ch'an (Zen) painting, using *hsüan* paper and Chinese brushes and developing a versatile brushwork. In traditional Chinese painting, calligraphic line and tonal gradation are important expressive elements. Like many Chinese and Japanese artists in the same period, Liu found out that the whole approach of Chinese painting had much in common with that of abstract expressionism. With some experience in abstract art, he developed his new techniques in order to achieve the results he sought for, namely, to use the Chinese medium to paint "abstract" paintings. His experience in oils and other Western media already had led him to the realization of the potentials of pure form, independent of representational shapes. Now, he began to understand why many Westerners were interested in Oriental paintings. What he had done in Western media, with all those painstaking techniques such as mixing sand with oil colors and putting plaster on canvas, could now be transferred to the ink and paper medium with somewhat similar results. *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* (Fig. 20) was one of the



FIG. 20 Liu Kuo-sung  
*I Hear Your Voice, My Country*, 1961  
Ink on paper, 51.96 x 29.4 in (132 x 67 cm)



FIG. 21 Liu Kuo-sung, *Creator's Work in May*, 1962  
Ink and color on paper, 40.55 × 26.38 in (103 × 67 cm)



FIG. 22 Liu Kuo-sung, *Cool upon Awakening in Spring*, 1962  
Ink and color on paper, 43.9 × 22 in (111.5 × 56 cm). Collection of Shandong Museum

early experiments of this kind. Although some details can still be considered as similar to mountains and trees, the whole painting is quite abstract, stressing formal qualities rather than representational details.

Even in this return to the traditional medium the task of finding his own way was still not easy. Two paintings in 1962 testified to his agony. *Creator's Work in May* (Fig. 21) was one of his major attempts after the return to paper and ink. To try to get the same interesting texture as that of his plastered canvas before, he first covered the *hsüan* paper with bold and free brushwork such as those in *I Hear Your Voice My Country*, and then developed a background pattern of textures by pressing wrinkled papers with colored ink onto the surface. This patterning was done primarily with ink with some touches of light green. Obviously, the aim of this new process was to transfer the images from such paintings as the *Lofty Mt. Lu* to the ink-paper medium. However, the result was quite different. The more artificial and hard-edged background of *Creator's Work in May*, though interesting in itself, could not evoke such feeling of depth, mystery, and transformation as the

plastered canvas. Furthermore, the ink shapes, some of which remind one of landscape details, seem to be lost in the somewhat mechanical background.

However, the effects of these new shapes and textures on paper were not entirely negative. In order to explore some of the possibilities offered by this new technique, he turned more to the hard-edged shapes as a way to harmonize both the ink shapes and the textures. *Cool upon Awakening in Spring* (Fig. 22), also done in 1962, turned away from the more fluid shapes and took up pure abstract shapes with hard edges and artificial shapes that vaguely resemble some industrial products, such as spools and threads, toy boxes and strings. Naturally, this was no longer the exploration of new expressions for traditional landscape, but an attempt to reveal the workings of a mechanical world. This new experiment, then, did not seem to have served his purpose. After some further attempts, he abandoned this direction of exploration.

Perhaps the most important development for Liu in 1962 was the discovery of a coarse cotton paper (*mien* paper), available in Taiwan. In itself, cotton paper is nothing new, for it has been in use

for centuries in China and Japan, although not usually for paintings. This paper has a rather rough texture, created by the large amount of cotton remnants still left on its surface. Traditionally, since Chinese artists wanted to paint on smooth surfaces, cotton paper was seldom employed. However, for Liu Kuo-sung, the rough surface and natural texture seem to have offered many possibilities. After some experiments he ordered a special cotton paper 'to be made for him with even rougher textures and larger pieces of cotton fibers still attached to the surface. (This kind of paper has since been known as "Liu Kuo-sung paper.") He began painting on the rough surface of the paper with large ink brushes, then pulling out the cotton fibers from the paper, especially those from the painted areas, leaving only some white streaks within the dark patches. Around these experiments his new art was born.

### Synthesis: 1963–65

To tell the truth, I shall be worried to death if there is someone who paints exactly like me, for it is not too difficult to imitate one single technique and one single style. However, it is very difficult to create a style that is all new and belongs to me alone. It has been twenty-four years since I started studying traditional Chinese painting at the age of twelve. Even if the counting starts from the time when I entered Taiwan Normal University as an art major, it has been seventeen years. (This was written in 1968.) During this period I studied under many masters, imitated many schools of painting, tasted many different techniques and groped in many directions. Before I ... created my own style, I showed a different image in each of the exhibitions in which I participated. Because of that, I was called a "diabolical genius who changed fast and who could paint like anyone he imitated." However, after I really found my own way and developed my own style, no one could share my own elation. How could I not be worried about someone who was skilful in imitation taking over the fruits resulting from many years of hard work and painful search? ... Anyone who has read my books will realize that I am strongly opposed to those painters who took imitating as creating. Once I boldly proposed the slogan, "Imitation of the new should not take the place of the imitation of the old; copying the Western should not take the place of copying the Chinese." I also compared this slogan to a double-bladed sword, which, in the name of creating a new Chinese painting style, hurt the traditionalist school that only imitated the old Chinese masters on the one hand and the Westernized school that only followed the fashionable styles abroad on the other. In the past we only took note of those conservative painters who, instead of creating, regarded imitation, which was a step in their training, as the ultimate goal in painting. We laughed at their stupidity, scolded their falseness and criticized their ignorance of art as a creative activity. However, we seldom turned back to examine our own selves to see whether we did reach the land of creativity when we criticized the others. Now the traditional "ts'un" (a technique of depicting mountains in Chinese painting) has long since been a corpse and traditional form (such as landscape, figure, birds and flowers) have long become dry wells, totally

lacking in new life. But those "modern" painters who follow fashionable styles in the West have also lost themselves. We are no longer ancient Chinese nor modern Westerners. We do not live in the Sung or Yüan society, nor in the modern European or American environment. If it is false for us to copy old Chinese paintings, isn't it the same to paint modern Western painting? Imitation can never take the place of creativity. As a Chinese painter, one cannot talk about being creative if one does not realize this. If he wants to talk about being creative, he must first have a firm conviction and single ideal, namely to create some new paintings which have never been seen in either ancient or modern times in China or abroad and which are uniquely Chinese in approach." ("What Is New, What Is Modern?")

Looking in retrospect, Liu Kuo-sung had a certain sense of pride in his achievement during those crucial years of experiments and breakthroughs. He had firm convictions, and he worked hard in order to realize them. That took place in 1963. Once the basic technical problems had been solved, a whole stream of new and interesting works came from his studio. Each of these works was a major step in his new development. There are too many works from this period to mention here, but a few are sufficient to make clear the main stream of his art development.

The *Image of May* (Fig. 23) of 1963 was one of the early successes of this new approach. The medium is traditionally Chinese: paper, ink, Chinese colors, and Chinese brushes. With the technique he has developed, an interesting texture is created by removing the upper layer of the cotton paper, leaving a rough surface. When ink patches and washes are applied to this surface, a new texture results. The style is bold and free, thus somewhat Western in spirit. The large dark patches of ink create a sense of vigorous movement surging upward on the picture surface, as in a traditional Chinese landscape. To develop a sense of depth, Liu uses many light washes in varying tones, a standard technique of traditional painters. The result is a painting with elements somewhat reminiscent of older Chinese landscape painting, such as clouds, mountains and peaks on the one hand and of pure abstract movements in the spirit of abstract expressionism on the other. The viewer is easily lured into this newly created world, moving and floating freely in space. Liu Kuo-sung has thus captured the "Spirit Consonance" of traditional Chinese painting by an abstraction.

Another major step in his development can be seen in his *Lost in Mist* of the same year (Fig. 24),<sup>5</sup> now in the City Hall Museum of Hong Kong. The coarse cotton paper which he had discovered and experimented with for some time was used very successfully to achieve the desired effects. While the basic approach of *Image of May* has been retained, a number of new techniques were introduced. One is the removal of some rough fibers after painting over them, resulting in white streaks against a background of ink washes, as shown especially clearly in the lower left side of the painting. The other is the application of some colors, usually blue or green, in the middle of the ink patches, to create a sense of depth in the otherwise rather flat areas of ink. This technique had been used in the *Image of May*, but was now more highly developed into a major mode of expression. The contrast between the more solid blobs and the lighter patches, between the rounder inks and the more sharp-edged strokes in the middle, and between the darker masses on the left and above and the more empty area on the lower right,



FIG. 23 Liu Kuo-sung, *Image of May*, 1963  
Ink and color on paper, 43.90 x 22.05 in (111.5 x 56 cm)  
Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan



FIG. 24 Liu Kuo-sung, *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains*, 1963  
Ink and color on paper, 21.10 x 33.78 in (53.6 x 85.8 cm)  
Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection

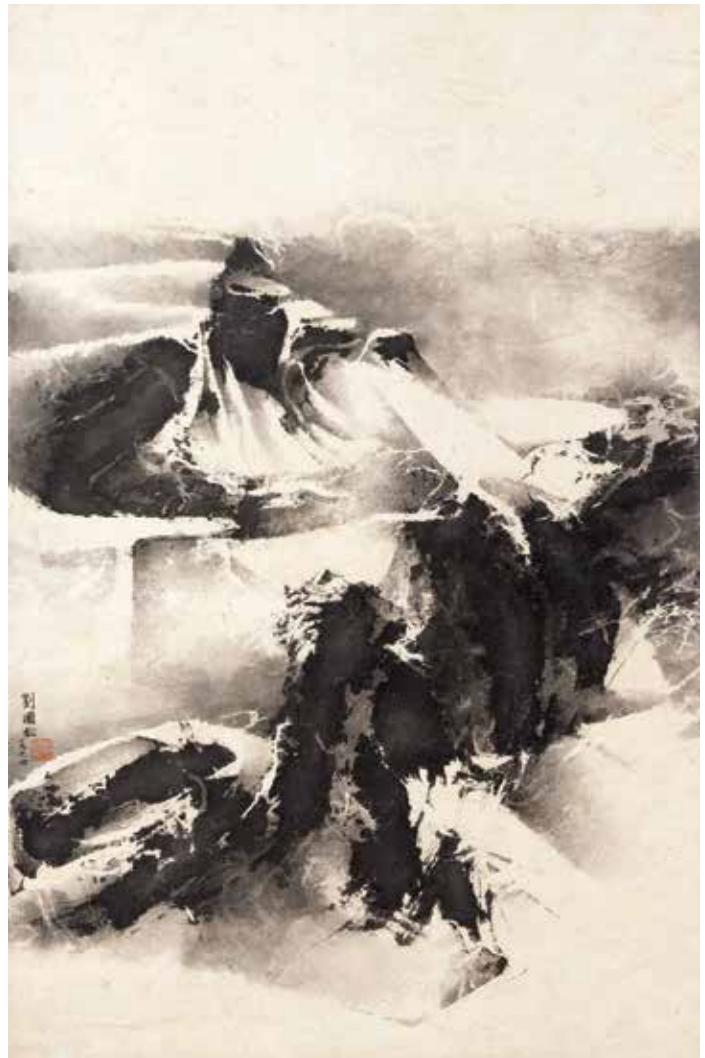


FIG. 25 Liu Kuo-sung, *Wintry Mountain Covered in Snow*, 1964  
Hanging scroll; ink and light color on fibrous paper, with artist's signature and seal,  
33 3/8 x 21 15/16 in (85.4 x 55.8 cm). Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum,  
The Chu-tsing Li Collection, Gift of B.U.K. Li in honor of Chu-tsing Li  
and in memory of Yao-wen Kwang Li and Teri Ho Li 2013.159

creates a high sense of drama for the whole painting. There is a feeling of dark clouds moving in the sky, of some snowy mountains in the distance, and of some cosmic drama that takes the viewer out of this world. Similar results can also be found in another work of the same period, *Mountain Torrent in Autumnal Forest*.

The potentials of this new approach are brought to their fullest resolution in *Wintry Mountain Covered with Snow*, completed in early 1964 (Fig. 25). The dark, spontaneous patches and the more controlled light washes form interesting contrasts in a more traditional theme, creating the feeling of snowy mountains in the background and dark trees in the foreground. Instead of the feeling of perpetual movements as in the other paintings, this composition offers something different. All the moving, agitated, and rumbling forms in the foreground, from the lower left to the middle right, seem to lead gradually to a more stable, more permanent mountain peak on the upper left. The peak, with snow-like white streaks against dark masses, seems to be radiant in the light beyond. It seems as if all the agitation and strife below has finally been resolved in the high peak, a symbol of eternal harmony and unity. It is one of the paintings that strongly echoes the landscape tradition in China but at the same time brings in a completely modern note.

Another painting similar in both style and expression is *Silvery Cloud on Top of Mountains* now in the collection of John Bunker of Denver.<sup>7</sup> From some ink patches which suggest pieces of rocks in the lower right, one can move up to the large area of white in the middle, similar to snow, and finally to the dark areas above which resemble peaks jutting up against the sky. The fact that the painting is now located at Denver is most appropriate. It is actually an image of a divine country, full of strange mountains and

breathtaking scenery. As in most of his paintings of this kind, there is no human trace to be found. Everything seems to be the work of the Creator. One has the feeling of divine desolation, lonesome and out of this world.

In these several works, some of the major characteristics of Liu Kuo-sung's work can be seen. One is his strong experimental spirit, which has taken him through many stages of development. He has not pursued new techniques merely for their own sake, but has always subjected them to his own expression, and when techniques and expressions finally came into harmony, his art blossomed. Another characteristic is his sense of movement and drama. With high contrasts and varying textures and tonalities, he carries the viewers into a world of eternal motion and powerful drama. Furthering this end, his compositions are never centralized, nor in verticals and horizontals, but are usually off-centered, curving and turning, and thus they produce many unexpected surprises. A third characteristic is his strong feeling for depth. Unlike the pure calligraphic character of some Chinese painters, whose strokes are often flat and two-dimensional, his works have a sense of depth achieved by use of washes, colors, and many other techniques. With this depth he seems to have extended an invitation to the viewer to move into the picture, his created world.

It is interesting to compare his created world with that of such Western artists as de Chirico, Tanguy, Marc, and Kandinsky. De Chirico's world seems to be a mixture of a desire to be liberated from the trappings of time and space in modern life with a nostalgia for the past of the Renaissance world. Thus his world is constructed with the created objects of man, such as buildings, squares, trains and other objects, transformed outside of the usual contexts of everyday life. His works present a dreamy effect, making us aware of the limitations of everyday experience and longing for a blending of past, present, and future into one single experience. Tanguy's world seems to be a combination of the unknown world under the sea or up in the sky, with strange half-animate and half-inanimate objects inhabiting it. In the worlds of both of these artists, one can be free from the problems of everyday life. They are dreamy and imaginary, rather pleasant and even gay. However, in the worlds of Marc and Kandinsky, as their writings testify, the abstract realm is a refuge from the *human* world. Marc, especially, expressed his distaste for humans and found the abstract world more assuring, while Kandinsky looked for the spiritual in his pursuit of abstraction. But in Liu Kuo-sung's world, there seems to be a blend of several elements. One is the traditional Chinese idea of finding in landscape an escape from the din and dust of the human world and a way of achieving a spiritual communion between the self and the cosmos. Another is the Western idea of attempting to find in the form of painting the basic aesthetic value itself, regardless of its representational values. In this mixture, he attempts to continue the feeling for landscape in the Chinese tradition while pursuing the idea of form itself. At his point of departure there is none of Marc's strong hatred for the human

world nor of de Chirico's attempt to break away from the time and space restrictions. To Liu form is the most important element, with all its beauty, drama, and feeling. There is no violence, no sorrow, and no hatred—rather, all the memories of the past are recalled into one new harmony. The richness of his paintings lies in his ability to blend the Chinese desire to be liberated from the pettiness of everyday life, Tanguy's longing for a world of the imagination, Kandinsky's search for the spiritual, and the modern interest in form as an end itself, into an artistic unity. In short, his paintings are mirrors of his own idealism and even utopia, where one can experience the excitements of aesthetic life, with all its colors, contrasts, dramas, and memories of the art of the past.

The year 1965 was perhaps one of his most productive years, with numerous interesting paintings executed. With a personal style already established, he was quite confident in his directions. He knew where he was going. Although his experimental spirit continued, bringing innovations and enrichments, he held on to his own solution and broadened its possibilities. He ordered his own papers, used his own techniques, and melded them in his own designs. To his great joy, his paintings began to be appreciated and understood, especially by a number of young American scholars who came to Taiwan to do research in Chinese history and culture. Liu Kuo-sung's art truly blossomed during this period.

In *Fantasy in February* now in the Mrs. Rose Cooper Collection (in Detroit), Liu's confidence is shown in his free and sure way of handling his brush and ink. Compared with his works of 1964, in which both his ink and brushwork are more controlled and the forms tend to be more tradition-oriented, this painting already reveals an outburst of spontaneous energy, giving free reign to his imagination. Yet these free plays of ink still evoke images like before, such as clouds, mists, snowy mountains, waterfalls, etc. Here they seem to be always changing and evolving. In addition, a somewhat new element which had been only slightly explored before began assuming a prominent role. As a counterpoint to the dark strokes and patches, a number of light lines and soft grays appear on the left side, created by a greater exploration of the potentials of the fibers on the cotton paper. Such a contrast between these two kinds of tonal qualities of ink and of texture has become a typical feature of Liu's work from then on, a contrast which creates a heightened sense of visual drama.

A similar expression can be found in his *Autumn Travelers I* (Fig. 26), now in the collection of Mrs. William Moore of New York. The paper with the heavy fibers is now used to the utmost effect. From a misty background a mass of dark strokes with white streaks looms into the middle, turning, twisting, changing, and evolving. Again, as a sharp counter-movement, a large patch of white thrusts in from the left, cutting into the dark mass, but also becoming resolved in it. This pure, abstract interplay of form draws from some of the powerful landscape expressions of such people as Chu Ta and Tao-chi of the seventeenth century, but at the same time shows a close tie with the abstract expressionists. Yet his form





**FIG. 26** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Autumn Travelers I*, 1965  
Ink and color on paper  
23.23 x 35.83 in (59 x 91 cm)

and style are quite different from those of Tobey, Kline, Hartung, Soulages, and others, being entirely his own.

In this painting too, new elements can be found. One is the use of color. Up to this time, color played only a subordinate role in his work, either in slight washes or in heavier pigments inside the ink patches. Now a pervasive color is used for the whole painting. The process is, however, rather simple. Before painting, the cotton paper is tinted yellow by Chinese traditional color in the mounter's shop. After painting, with the fibers taken out, there is a blend of black, white and yellow together in the painting. Also shown in this work is another new technique—painting on the back side of the paper, as a way to create more variations in the textures of the paper when seen from the front side. A third device he develops is the dramatic use of a large unpainted area, which appears yellow in this painting, to disrupt the completely filled area of brushwork and wash, making the whole composition richer and more powerful.

One of the first major attempts Liu Kuo-sung made to break away from the confinement of the regular size of cotton paper—about 2 x 3 feet—is the grand composition, *Frosty Hills Afar* in the Warren I. Cohen collection of East Lansing, Michigan. This painting is made up by joining three pieces of paper. Here, all the techniques developed up to that time were utilized, including ink, fibers, colors, back painting, and colors inside patches. The painting becomes a grand symphony of nature, again with images that evoke memories of snowy mountains, waterfalls, and forests. In terms of traditional Chinese landscape, this painting possesses the

divine power that elevates man from all the pettiness of the dusty world to attain the realm of complete abandonment.

The most ambitious painting attempted by Liu up to this time is a work based on one of the oldest forms of Chinese painting, the handscroll. *The Image of Fleeting Time* (Fig. 27), measuring 21 x 254 inches and now in the Avery Brundage Collection in San Francisco, attempts to recapture the basic spirit and expression of this unique Chinese form. Starting from the right, a few strokes of ink seem to have suggested a few rocks against the white snowy background. This leads to an area that reminds one of caverns and waterfalls. Further to the left, a group of light streaks created by fibers seem to suggest trees and forests. Next, a larger area combines all the elements, snow, rocks, trees, waterfalls, all in a dramatic climax. This open-close-open-close composition finally follows the ending of many traditional landscape scrolls by having a fade-out at the end, where dark areas give way to lighter and lighter touches, until the end of the scroll marked by Liu's signature and seal. The whole development of the composition echoes dramatic, musical, or cinematic forms, again showing Liu's mastery of the medium, combining the East and West in one grand symphony.

In the latter part of 1965, new experiments led him to another bold attempt—collage. By pasting one piece of paper, often

**FIG. 27** Liu Kuo-sung, *The Image of Fleeting Time*, 1965  
Handscroll; ink and colors on paper, 21.5 x 236 in (54.6 x 600 cm)  
Collection of Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Museum purchase, B68D17



different in texture or color, on another, he was able to achieve a more dramatic effect in the exploration of the form and style of his paintings. *Symphony of Waterfalls* in the Mrs. George Shinno collection of Los Angeles, makes use of all his previously developed resources plus the collage technique. The title is most appropriate. One should note, however, that in most cases his titles are given after the completion of his paintings. This means that form and expression rank first in his approach, and subject is thus not an essential part of his initial thinking. This is quite a departure from the standard Chinese approach, where one is always supposed to start from a subject, either figure, flower and bird, or landscape.

This phase of Liu Kuo-sung's work can be examined in the book, *Painting of Liu Kuo-sung*, published by the National Historical Museum in Taipei in 1966. For a modern Chinese artist, his was already a great achievement. After years of groping and experimenting, he had finally evolved a style that could embody all his past training and experiments and all his ideas and aspirations. It was a happy union, a great synthesis, and a new height in Chinese painting.

### Travel Abroad: 1966–67

Toward the end of 1965, two new developments led to a great change in his life. The first was an exhibition called "The New Chinese Landscape," organized by Chu-tsing Li and Thomas Lawton, sponsored by The JDR (John D. Rockefeller) 3rd Fund, and circulated by the American Federation of Arts in America. Shown first in Taipei during October 1966 before the paintings were shipped to New York, the exhibition was the first major attempt to introduce works of the six artists to the American public. Starting from the summer of 1966 at the University of Minnesota Art Gallery, it toured the United States for two years, including such prominent museums as the Nelson Gallery of Art at Kansas City, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the American Federation of Arts Gallery in New York, along with many university galleries such as those of Iowa, Oregon, and others. Liu was one of the six artists

represented in the show, with ten works. The exhibition brought him a great deal of recognition and fame in America as well as many friends among collectors, museum curators, artists, and others all over the United States. Soon not only all the paintings in that show, but also many of his other works were sold.

Of equal importance was a grant from The JDR 3rd Fund, the first of its kind to an artist in Taiwan, which enabled Liu to spend a year in America and travel in Europe. His first time away from China, he arrived in America late in January, just in time to attend the opening of his one-man show at the Laguna Beach Art Center near Los Angeles. The success of the show made it possible for him to finance a trip for his wife to join him several months later. Liu first spent three months in the School of Art of the University of Iowa City. There he visited classes in art and art history, learned intaglio at the studio of Marizio Lasansky's Iowa Print Group, and discussed paintings and ideas with professors and students. During the summer after Iowa, he and his wife travelled all over the United States, visiting galleries, museums, art schools, and universities and absorbing the scenic beauties from the coast of Maine and the Niagara Falls to the mountains of Colorado and the deserts of California. In fall of that year he settled down in New York City, in a studio apartment on West 70th St. There, from September to May, he lived and worked. His wife had joined him in the summer, leaving their two children behind in Taiwan with grandparents. Together, he and his wife explored the city of New York and its surrounding areas, especially galleries and museums, and met many artists and art critics. Liu also worked hard on his paintings for one-man shows at The Gallery in Denver in November, Gallery 100 at Princeton in January, the Nordness Gallery in New York in February, and the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City in April. In this period, first in a studio apartment and later in a residence hotel on 110th Street, Liu had one of the most productive periods of his life. Undoubtedly it was, in part at least, the result of the stimulations and challenges of New York.

As he himself wrote later, "...in those two years, I visited eighteen countries plus West Berlin and Hong Kong; and saw close to one hundred galleries and museums. It could be said that I saw all



FIG. 28 Liu Kuo-sung  
*Water is Busy*, 1966  
Ink and color on paper  
23.90 x 36.54 in (60.7 x 92.8 cm)  
Collection of Phoenix Art Museum,  
Gift of Jeannette Shambaugh Elliott



FIG. 29 Liu Kuo-sung, *Autumn Dusk*, 1966  
Ink and color on paper, 23.23 x 36.02 in (59 x 91.5 cm)  
Denver Art Museum: Permanent Collection, 1966.9  
Photography courtesy Denver Art Museum

those that should be seen. Not only was my knowledge and experience greatly broadened, but also great confidence was gained for my own works and ideals, for they had passed the strict test of world art." This was undoubtedly one of the great experiences of his life. Yet as he wrote himself later, all the visits abroad did not change the basic course of his art, for before his trip he had struggled and formed his own style and his trip had merely strengthened his conviction and led to greater productivity of his work. Indeed, some of the works done in Iowa City and New York during these two years were among the greatest works he had done up to that time.

One of the most interesting paintings of this period is *Water Is Busy* (Fig. 28), in the collection of Sydney Stein of Chicago. Done on thick and heavy fibered paper, with all the techniques he had developed up to that time, the painting evokes the image of some caverns with stalactites hanging on the walls, with water flowing down from above. It combines a traditionally Chinese feeling for the wonders of nature with the modern concept of penetrating into the depth of nature and its correlative, the human mind. This constant flow of feeling between nature and the mind, between external image and inner emotion, and between actual landscape and painted form, is one of the major expressive factors in the art of Liu Kuo-sung.

Several other paintings were among the best works, along with *Water Is Busy*, done during the three months when he was in Iowa City. *Swirling Movement* also in the Sydney Stein collection, is marked by abstract shapes that turn and whirl in the picture. It evokes not only images of clouds, winds and storms, but also imaginary feelings of mysterious forces. The *Shih-men* is an allusion to a famous hydraulic dam in Taiwan—an abstract painting consisting of a light patch with dark streaks across the upper right surrounded by dark patches around it. But even without this reference in its title, the painting demonstrates Liu's ability to handle abstract shapes and textures in a dramatic unity.

*Autumn Dusk* (Fig. 29) at the Denver Art Museum is somewhat different from the others in having a pervasive yellow tone. The composition is based on a slightly off-centered cross, with empty areas on the upper left and the lower right and filled areas on the other two, dark patches on the lower left and light washes on the upper right. Ink, wash, brown, and yellow blend perfectly well in



FIG. 30 Liu Kuo-sung, *Autumn Travellers III*, 1966  
Ink and color on paper, 23.5 x 36 in (59.7 x 91.4 cm)

this painting of low-key music. In contrast, *Autumn Travellers III* (Fig. 30), is a high-key expression in vertical format. Large patches of ink with heavy fiber lines dominate the composition. This mountain image with details suggestive of rocks, trees, waterfalls, and mist is reminiscent of an early Chinese landscape, but its high-spirited treatment is more in line with the wonderful sceneries of the seventeenth-century artist Tao Chi.

While travelling was exciting and interesting, he always felt handicapped because he could not settle down to paint in his studio the ideas he had developed. Thus, as soon as he could stay for a while in a Lincoln Towers studio apartment in New York City, he worked feverishly, while often visiting galleries and museums. This was one of the most productive periods of his life. Many of his paintings, though continuing the same approach, show new highs in his art. The *Falling and Rising* at The JDR 3rd Fund continues the idea of *Water Is Busy* and *Shih-men* in having a motif resembling a waterfall, but emphasizes a contrast between the lighter falling movement of the left and the darker rising trend of the right. Another more daring painting using the waterfall theme is *And Down Goes the Water* (Fig. 31) which, according to the artist, was inspired by the Niagara Falls which he visited in the summer of 1966. Masses of dark form stretch across the picture, while sweeps of light strokes move downward in the upper right. The whole work suggests the Niagara Falls in the winter. Two paintings of this period center on the idea of rocks. *Rocks and Snow* displays a large group of dark patches with sharp edges in the lower half of the painting. Their stark blackness against the white background produces the impression of rocks in snow. In the upper portion of the painting, light and dark streaks against a half-tone background offer an indication of trees and forests. The *Strange Rocks* pursues this



FIG. 31 Liu Kuo-sung, *And Down Goes the Water*, 1967  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 23.78 x 36.62 in (60.4 x 93 cm). Collection of Shandong Museum



FIG. 32 Liu Kuo-sung, *Green Fantasy*, 1968  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 22.99 x 35.98 in (58.4 x 91.4 cm)

light-dark contrast to the fullest extent in another more or less cross-form composition. Only in the right is found some area of half tone as a relief from the strange clash of the black and white. A further exploration of this stark contrast is the *Huangshan* (*Yellow Mountain*) a large composition mounted on two scrolls. From the triangular collage shape in the lower right, dark forms stretch upward and leftward, breaking into the white stillness of the left side. The sheer weight and force of these forms reveal the tremendous energy of the artist.

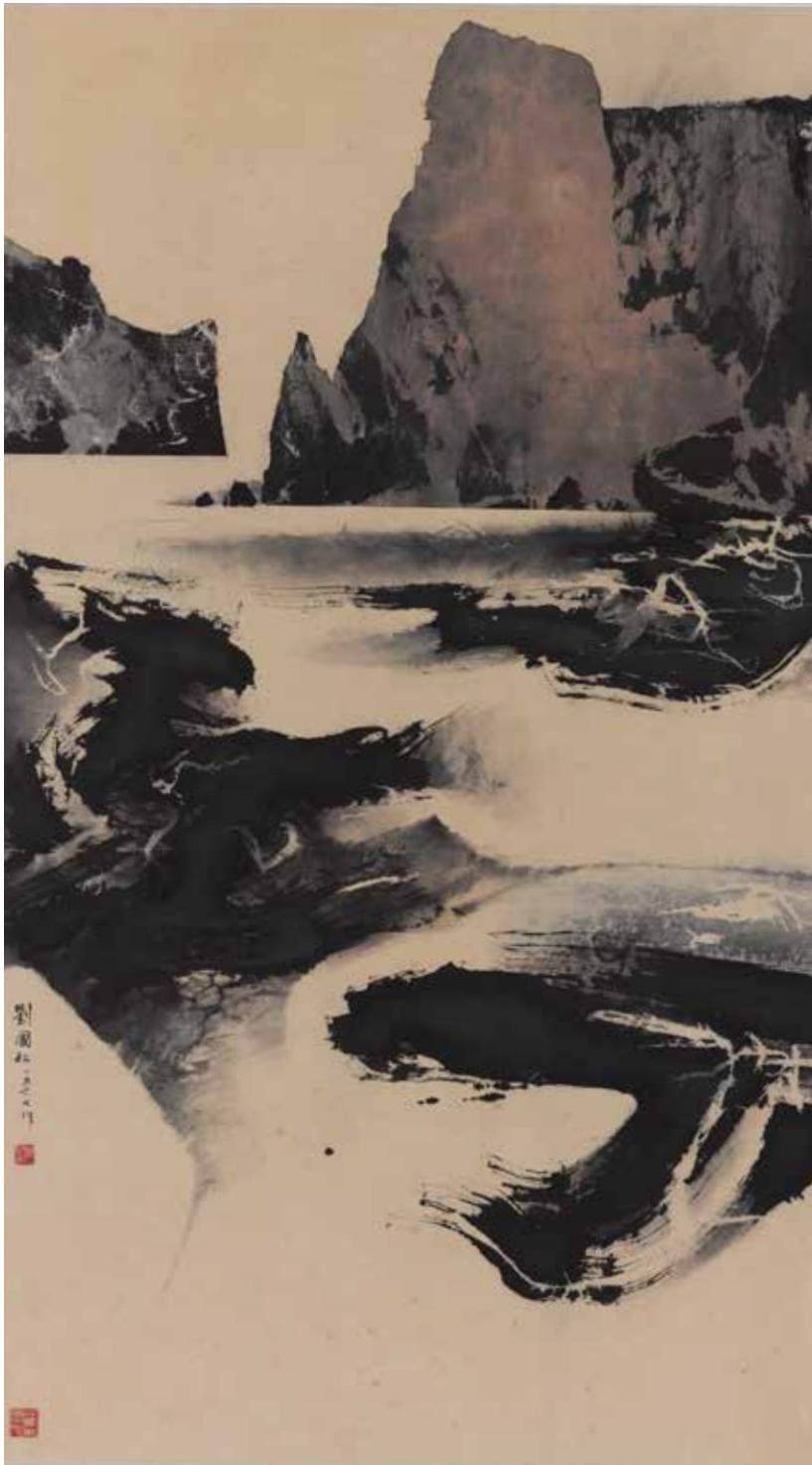
Other themes were also used by Liu Kuo-sung in the same period. *Cloud? Mist?* combines an equal amount of space for white, dark, and wash areas. Pictorially, the stark quality of light and dark is relieved by the wash at the upper right. It has the feeling of a storm hitting a seashore. In contrast, *T'ien Lake*, alluding to a famous scenic spot in the Ch'ang Pai Mountains, shows a combination of light, dark, and streaked areas, the latter suggestive of trees over a lake landscape. Different from these two is *Green Fantasy* (Fig. 32), in which there is a pervasive green with some dark patches and green, yellow, and gray and dark streaks. In spite of its strict abstract form, the painting

evokes a sense of spring. A dramatic composition is *Light in Darkness*. In a predominantly dark picture reminiscent of the inner side of a cave or of a rock quarry, a streak of light comes in from the left and creates a stir in the still atmosphere. The technique of dark patches and white lines is used to the fullest extent.

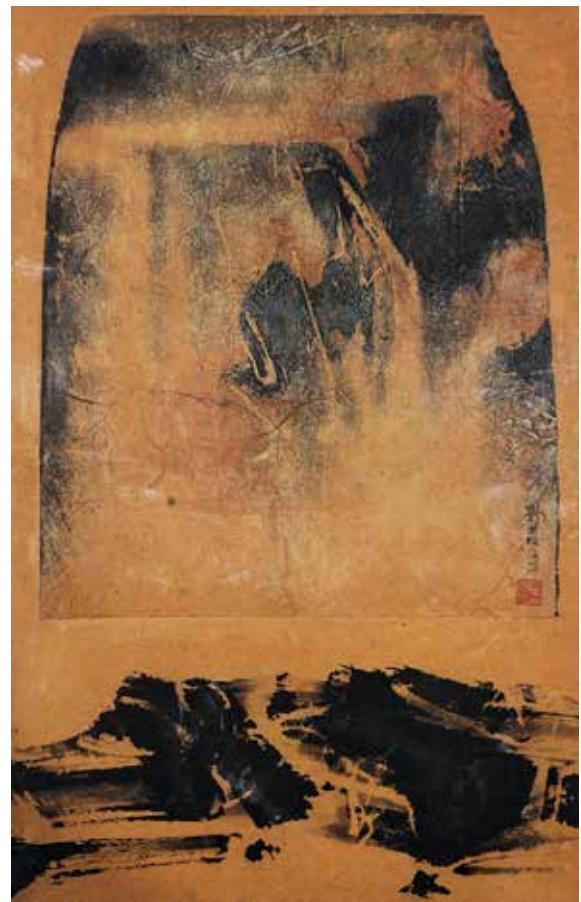
Two paintings of this period show a closer resemblance to the traditional Japanese and Chinese landscape. *Earthscape* seems to recall some of the Japanese screens, such as those representing Matsushima. Large patches of collage in color papers remind one of islands and mountains on land and sea. However, Liu is never a painter of simple landscapes. Just as the collage gives one simultaneously the impression of enhancing representation and of moving away from representation, so the straight line at the left gives one an ambiguous feeling of both a flat area and an abstract line effect. Similarly, *Through Rapids and Gorges* (Fig. 33), in the George Backmann Collection in Claremont, California, seems to have been derived from the traditional subject of the famous three gorges of the Yang-tze River. Several collage pieces in brown suggest mountains through which the rapids flow down. The sharp edges of these collage pieces again tend to emphasize pictorial rather than representative value. The dark patches in the lower half of the painting also serve the double purpose of representing certain water movements in the rapids and of suggesting the forces and dangers of the water. Their irregular moving shapes contrast sharply with the more regular stable forms above. In this kind of work, Liu can be seen as the creator of a new kind of Oriental landscape.

The ambiguity between landscape and abstraction in some of these paintings is further explored to an almost philosophical level in two paintings of the same period. *Loftiness* (Fig. 34) done late in 1966, has a collage in a large rectangular shape with hard edges that occupies almost the whole upper two thirds of the vertical painting. This rectangular shape, with a slight curving-in near the top, is purely abstract with no representational elements, while the lower third of the painting is covered with ink patches and white streaks suggesting snows and mountains. The effect is not unlike that of some of Dalí's surrealistic images hanging over a broad landscape or of Magritte's objects suspended over the ocean. Now, transferred to a more abstract medium, a whole new dimension is opened up. Is the flat surface of the pasted paper more real than the semi-illusionistic section below? The upper section appears to be heavy, while the lower section is deep and light.

In another painting of the same kind, the question is more explicitly asked in the title, *Which Is Outside?*, also of 1967. The lower half is painted with the same semi-abstract shapes suggestive of mountains, snows, and waterfalls, while the upper



**FIG. 33** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Through Rapids and Gorges*, 1967  
Ink and color with collage on paper, 52.01 × 29.65 in (132.1 × 75.3 cm)  
Private Collection, Taiwan



**FIG. 34** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Loftiness*, 1966  
Ink and color with collage on paper mounted on canvas  
35.43 × 22.76 in (90 × 57.8 cm)



FIG. 35 Liu Kuo-sung, *Which Is Land?*, 1967  
Ink and color with collage on paper, 23.23 x 29.13 in (59 x 74 cm)

half is a collage of white paper against a grayish green background. Due to the fact that this collage paper is white and square, with sharp and straight edges on all sides and with different colors and ink patches inside, one may receive the impression of a window opening up in the sky. Actually, there is no inside anywhere in the painting, for both the upper and lower portions seem to be the outside. But the composition heightens the question of reality. Which is more real: the large paper, the collage, or the painted area? There is a sharp contrast between the two areas in the picture.

A similar attempt at contrasting ideas of reality is seen in a painting done with some startling new techniques. This is *Which Is Land?* (Fig. 35), which is partly done by transferring a magazine image onto the paper, a technique he learned from the Pratt Institute in New York. The painting consists of three areas: the sailboat in the lower right, an abstract image against a yellow background on cotton paper on the left, and a pasted white cotton paper with dark forms on the upper right. While the sailboat tends to take us to the familiar world of everyday life, its neutral background, with something of a shadow on its left, seems to have isolated it from the ordinary world. Outside of this area, the other two areas with their broad sweeps of brushstrokes and white and yellow streaks seem to have given us some idea of seawaves or landstrips. Although the yellow and white areas are quite distinctive in their separation, some ink patches tend to slide from one area to the other. The puzzle is all the more interesting because the white area is in the shape of a TV screen, while the sailboat, in spite of all the diagonal lines, seems to be static, trapped in a square in a neutral background. According to Liu, this idea of having three different areas with related images came from the movies shown at Expo 67 in Montreal, which he visited in the spring of 1967. But in terms of Liu's own development, this sudden thrust of a familiar image into the otherwise desolate world of pure form is startling. Actually there are three steps in the picture: realistic image, land and sea intimations, and abstraction. The painting is thus quite provocative in expression. This could also be an indication of his flirting with pop art. However, while all this is quite interesting, the painting seems to have become more an illustration of a philosophical question rather than an expression of his inner feeling. Thus, after only two attempts in this direction, Liu abandoned the idea of using realistic images in his paintings.

During the summer of 1967, Liu and his wife left America and travelled extensively in Europe: to London, Paris, Amsterdam,

Stockholm, Münich, Berlin, Vienna, Zurich, Lugano, Barcelona, Florence, Rome, Athens, and other cities. This trip opened his eyes not only to the great European heritage in art but also to recent developments in European painting. But again he became more and more set on his own direction. Arriving at Taipei in October after an absence of almost two years, he was glad to be reunited with his two children and the rest of the family, and enjoyed new status as leader not only of the Fifth Moon Group, but also of the younger artists in Taiwan. He was invited to many lectures at universities, colleges, schools, art associations, and other groups. He was asked to write many articles about his impressions of the art of America and Europe. In all these, he showed the confidence he had gained during his travels abroad. In one of the articles, he wrote:

About four or five years ago, I had said more than once to many painter friends both inside and outside the Fifth Moon Group:

In the next several years, there will be important artists coming out of China. Whoever is among this first group will receive international attention and become international artists. At the same time, they will also be the most representative personalities in China since the founding of the Republic. Of course, all will depend on the far-sightedness and effort of the artists themselves.

There were two reasons for my making this statement:

1. *As a natural outcome of its own development.* Since the May 4th (1919) New Cultural Movement, there has been half a century of ferment introducing modern Western artistic ideas into China. At first it was rejection and agitation, and then complete acceptance (the so-called establishment of Western painting in China). After the Second World War, with almost twenty years of peace and prosperity in Taiwan, artists have had time to think about their own future and that of Chinese art. As a result, there is a tendency to turn from complete acceptance (of Western art) to the founding of our own tradition. This "awakening" is the foundation stone for "genuine artists."
2. *As a natural result of international trends.* The basic idea of Western art is a "reflection of its own time." A great majority of Western artists regard art as a mirror directly reflecting their own society realistically. However during the last twenty years those works 'reflecting their own time' were not able to fill the needs of artists who began to dig deeply into their own inner selves. At the same time they discovered that from ancient times Chinese art objects did not emphasize superficial "reflecting," but put their weight on spiritual awakening. Therefore, like we Chinese artists paying great attention to the development of modern Western art, they closely watched Chinese art and did thorough research on it, in order to gain greater understanding. In the same way, what contemporary Chinese artists are doing or working on naturally came under their close attention.

So, I have repeatedly been urging my painter friends to be making special efforts to work hard during these years. Sometimes although a speaker may try hard, the listeners might not really understand his ideas. But in all my travels in Europe and America, this view of mine has been completely vindicated. ("Chinese Classical Art in Europe and America," *Yu-shih Wen-i* monthly, July 1968, pp. 63-64).

This highly nationalistic attitude, reasserted after Liu's return to Taiwan, reflected his great confidence. Thus, contrary to some people's ideas about those who go abroad, Liu Kuo-sung after two years abroad did not show any major change in his style. Rather, the two years helped to deepen his art in all aspects; technically, stylistically, and conceptually. He had no doubt about his direction, but he continued, as always, to experiment and to try out new ideas within this direction. The result was great enrichment of his art.

This nationalistic attitude was also a result of his concern for the future of Chinese art, especially on Taiwan. As mentioned before, the great intellectual debate in China during the past half century was whether China should go completely Western, follow traditional ideas, or find a way between the two. In Taiwan younger artists have had to struggle with this debate in order to find their own directions. It is thus not surprising that Liu, who had gone through many years of experiment and search to find his own way, wrote in such tones. He was trying to convey to his fellow-countrymen the confidence he had gained during his travel abroad. He was hoping to arouse in the minds of the young a greater interest in combining the best elements of both Chinese and Western traditions in a new Chinese art.

### New Development: 1967-69

The short period between his arrival in Taiwan in October and the end of 1967 was again one of the most productive in his life. The months of travel in Europe, fulfilling a long-cherished dream of coming face-to-face with the great monuments of Western art, must have filled him with all sorts of ideas for his own paintings. From Rembrandt to Van Gogh, from El Greco to Picasso, and from Michelangelo to Marini, he absorbed with feverish enthusiasm. Once settled down in an apartment in Taipei, he began to work over these new ideas, with amazing results.

One of his major experiments in this period was an attempt to retry the *hsüan* paper for his works, without resorting to the cotton-fibered paper that he had been using for some years. The result was a number of works, about two dozen in number, in this new approach. One of the most interesting works of this kind is *So Sings the Ghostly Moon*, which shows images of mountains in light and dark with dark clouds seemingly sweeping over the sky. Here, with the same big brushes, he was still trying to achieve the effect of streaks of white within dark patches of ink and to show the sharp contrast between the dark strokes and white paper. In some other works of this kind he came near to trying his idea of automatic painting, using a few patches of ink supplemented by some washes around them against the white background, in an abstract manner without much reference to actual scenes or details.

Several other paintings of the same kind show his experiments with an older idea. *Mountain and River* is, like the last painting, an attempt to return to some traditional approaches using brushwork on paper in order to achieve semi-abstract landscapes. On the



FIG. 36 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Metaphysics of Rocks*, 1968  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 27.01 x 26.50 in (68.6 x 67.3 cm)  
Private Collection, Taiwan

right is a series of large dark strokes that run across the middle of the paper in a mixture of dark and brown. White streaks on top and dark small dots at the bottom look like big rocks. In the middle section, large dry strokes, also running vertically, seem to have carried the view all the way back to the far distance on the left. This interplay of light and dark, colored and ink strokes, of flat surface and spatial recession, of resemblance to landscape details and pure abstract strokes, is again an attempt to bring new life to an old tradition.

A further exploration of this approach is *The Metaphysics of Rocks* (Fig. 36), which combines the same idea with collage in a square composition. Two kinds of brushwork, one in dark ink with white streaks and the other in washes of lighter ink, are shown in a much bolder and freer manner. In the lower middle part are two pieces of collage, one large and the other small, both suggesting rock shapes. The paper is in color, but combined with some textures printed with wrinkled paper. Thus there seem to be several kinds of rocks, done with different techniques and brushwork. Yet, none of them are realistic enough to resemble real rocks. But each gives us an idea of some quality of rocks, such as jutting up, having interesting textures, or showing watery surfaces.

Gradually, Liu moved back to the cotton paper which he had used before, for he still found greater satisfaction in it. *Windy Solitude* is an example of this return. The big sweeps of dark ink still retain the characteristics of those in the *hsüan* paper, but the white streaks of cotton fiber bring back some of the quality of surprise and movement. In *Mossy Archaism* the cotton paper is back in full use. The overall yellow background, the green streaks, the soft ink spots, and the non-descriptive ink patches, tend to evoke a feeling of inner memories rather than of landscape. It seems to be almost a variation on a theme of Miro. However, landscape remains his main interest, as in *Green Earth*, which seems to show white peaks against the green background with complex textures. It appears to be a variation on Rembrandt's dramatic landscapes.



FIG. 37 Liu Kuo-sung, *Mountain Beyond Mountains*, 1967

Paper collage with ink and colors, 24.21 x 36.73 in (61.5 x 93.3 cm)

Collection of Asian Art Museum, San Francisco

The Avery Brundage Collection, B68D11

Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

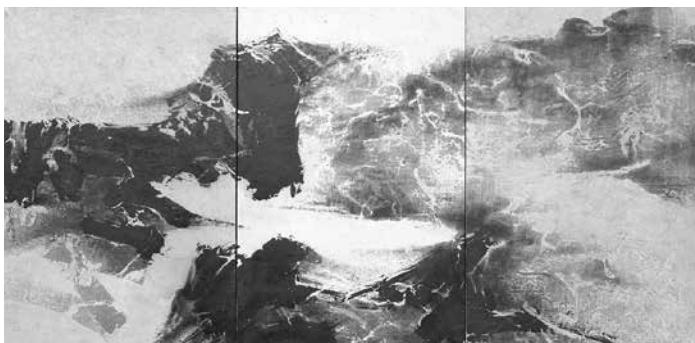


FIG. 38 Liu Kuo-sung, *White in the Middle*, 1968

Ink and acrylic on paper, 34.02 x 67.99 in (86.4 x 172.7 cm)

Most of Liu's works from 1968 seem to be different from those before, in Liu's pursuit of a more solid feeling of form, for complexity in both brushwork and composition, and for greater visual vitalization. Picture surfaces tend to be more filled up, and expression becomes quite rich. One of the most powerful paintings with solid form is *Mountain Beyond Mountains* (Fig. 37), now in the Avery Brundage Collection in San Francisco. The painting is done with all the basic techniques, such as strokes, fiber-removing, paper-pasting, and back painting. Compositinally, the picture is divided into two halves. The left half, dominated by light white paper, shows a number of solid patches reminiscent of some of those done on *hsüan* paper mentioned above. The right half, on the other hand, is filled with dark masses made up of pasted papers and shown close to the picture plane. The whole painting gives one the impression of some mountains in the clouds seen from the more fully shown ones at the right, or of some solid rocks by the sea, firmly and strongly holding against the attack of some dark forces rushing toward them. The interaction between the two halves of the picture is quite dynamic.

A large composition, measuring 34 by 68 inches, executed on three pieces of paper and mounted on three separate hanging scrolls that can be hung together as one composition is *White in the Middle* (Fig. 38). This was a traditional Chinese practice of which Liu was quite conscious when he worked on these compositions. However, a new element is added in his approach. Impressed by the multi-screen movies at Expo 67 at Montreal,

he returned to Taipei to try out two large compositions, one called *Gray in the Middle* and the other *White in the Middle*. The latter is painted on two pieces of gray paper with the white one in the middle. The composition continues through the three pieces. The techniques of patches, streaks and textures and colored papers still echo those of the previous years, but now the composition is more complex and fills more of the space.

Another painting of similar complexity and crowded composition is *Whirlwind* (Fig. 39), also in the Avery Brundage Collection in San Francisco. The yellow paper is covered with washes in gray, green, and dark yellow and with streaks in various colors. On the upper half of the paper, a few big strokes of dark ink with colors in the middle fly in a dramatic movement. The dark strokes seem to carry the whole picture toward the upper middle with tremendous power, as a release and liberation from the mass below. The rich color effect in this painting is the result of his use of acrylic, which he brought back from America.

The year 1968 was marked by a series of Liu's exhibitions, including one in the Wen-hsing Gallery in Taipei in January, one in the Seattle Art Museum in April, one in the Luz Gallery in Manila in September, and finally one in the Taft Museum in Cincinnati in December. Most of the works shown in these exhibitions combine all the techniques he had developed for some time. For example, *Seen from the Front, a Mountain; Seen from the Side, a Peak* which was shown at the Wen-hsing Gallery, is an example of this kind. A triangular shape resembling a mountain dominates the center of the painting, rising to the top of the picture. The upper portion of this mass is mixed with patches and streaks that remind one of forests, trees, clouds, and mist. On the other hand, the lower portion is done mostly with pasted papers of various colors. Here, the abstract combination of various shapes and areas is more evident. The power of the picture rests on the tension between the central mass and the background on the one hand and between the upper portion that evokes more concrete images of landscape and the lower one that is more abstract on the other. All the techniques are used here to achieve this symphony of abstract landscape.

A similar painting is the *Collage Pastoral*, which was shown at the Luz Gallery in Manila. Again a piece of multi-techniques, it blends the more concrete images of mountains with the more abstract collages. The left half is more a blank white piece while the right half is more a dark mass with streaks and patches in between. It is a bold experiment of such contrasts, but it is also a very unified semi-abstract expression.

One of the boldest paintings of this period is *Black Against Yellow*, in the collection of Mrs. Ferdinand E. Marcos of Manila. The whole painting is almost a collage. On the gray surface of the original paper is pasted a piece of yellow collage that fills up almost the entire surface of the picture. The wrinkled paper and the colorful streaks, some done with acrylic, bear no suggestion of landscape details. Below, several collages of white *hsüan* paper are pasted over the surface of the collage, their white and dark bringing new contrasts to the yellow and black. Again, it is a painting filled with visual enrichment.

In all these paintings plus many others done in the same year, Liu's art reached a point where he felt completely at ease in drawing from many of the techniques he had developed and many of the ideas he had worked over to achieve a unified expression which was completely his own. These are symphonic compositions that blend abstract elements and concrete images into one. They reveal a peak of his expression. In his earlier works, details were



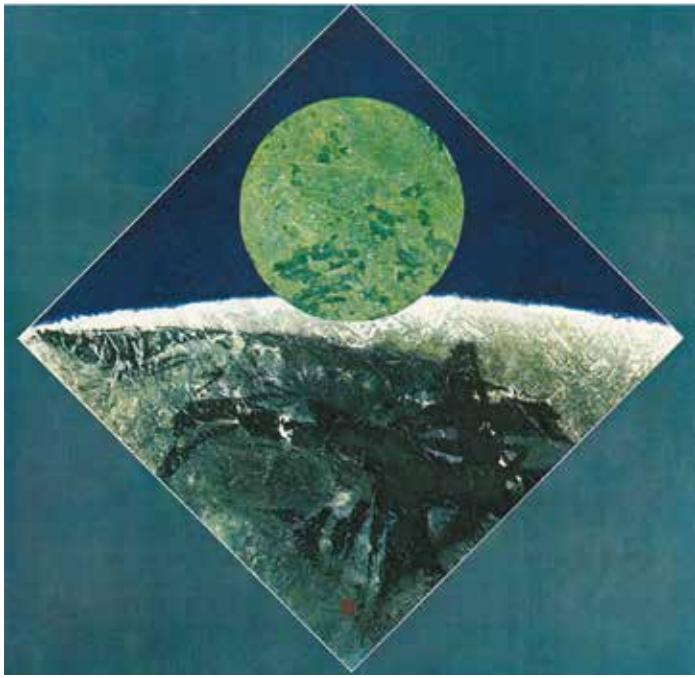
FIG. 39 Liu Kuo-sung, *Whirlwind*, 1968  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 23.74 x 36.50 in (60.3 x 92.7 cm)  
Collection of Asian Art Museum, San Francisco  
The Avery Brundage Collection, B66D20  
Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

usually more separate from each other and large empty areas were left. Now, objects and abstract shapes tended to blend into one complete unity, in all-filled compositions. One object cannot be easily separated from another; all are interlocked in complexity. Landscape, form, and inner feeling are all combined into one harmony in his paintings.

In the beginning days of 1969, a new direction in his painting began. At first, the new inspiration seems to have come from many of the colorful lanterns seen in temples during the Lantern festival shortly after the new year. While the lower part of a painting is left in the same treatment of landscape-like abstraction, the upper part is covered with a big red collage in square form, with a circle-form collage on cotton paper in its middle, covered with ink patches and colorful streaks. *Mid-Autumn Festival* (Fig. 40) is an example of this new approach. However, this development was brought to a dramatic turn by the news of the successes in space exploration by the Apollo astronauts. Watching the films of the Apollo team on television in Taipei, he got some new ideas of his own for his paintings. This new connection between his paintings and space exploration is not really strange, for his works have always shown some semi-abstract shapes suggestive of ranges of mountains and seas of clouds viewed from above. This was something that can also be traced back to tradition. Chinese painters from the Sung dynasty on, if not earlier, have always painted views seen from an imaginary high point in the clouds. They always regarded mountain hiking as an important preparation for a



FIG. 40 Liu Kuo-sung, *Mid-Autumn Festival*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 45.67 x 30.32 in (116 x 77 cm)



**FIG. 41** Liu Kuo-sung, *Which Is Earth? H*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 21.26 x 21.26 in (54 x 54 cm)  
Private collection, Taiwan

painter. There is almost an obsession in looking at things from a far and high point above, as a means of transcending all the pettiness of this dusty world and of achieving an identity with the great universal spirit. It is not surprising then that space exploration should become attractive to Chinese painters, for the fascinations of space could become extensions of their desires to transcend their earthly existence. For many people, the most exciting part of space travel may be machines, rockets and many other devices. But for Chinese painters, it is most likely to be the new vision of outer space.

One of the earliest paintings of this kind is *Which Is Earth? H* (Fig. 41), now in the Sydney Stein collection in Chicago, showing his new iconography: the placing of a round-shaped painted collage against a plain background over an area of painted forms, suggestive of one space body seen from another. Actually, the idea was not entirely new, but was the result of many combinations and experiments. In 1962 Liu had done two round-shaped paintings, and in 1966-67, while in America, he had done some paintings in a round-shaped format, which could be traced in origin to some of the fan-shaped paintings of the Sung dynasty. Similarly, the placing of one painted shape hovering over a broad painted area are found in several other paintings done also in 1966-67, such as *Loftiness* (see Fig. 34) and *Which Is Outside?* As indicated before, the attempt in those paintings was more philosophical and somewhat similar to Dalí and Magritte. Now combining the round-shaped patch with a broad painted area below, his paintings found a new connection in the space views.

It was a happy solution. Pictorially, the round shape has brought new life to the whole composition problem. In contrast to the broad sweeps, semi-automatic form, and irregular shapes that had been typical of his works, the controlled, hard-edged spherical area was a new note. Together, the two halves of the painting create a tendentious relationship, each enriching the feeling of the other. The crowdedness and the confining feeling of the sphere seems to be envious of the freedom and movement of the broad

space below, while the uncontrolled vastness of the lower half tends to find the gem-like concentration above as its guide. The combination of the two offers endless drama in the composition. Philosophically, the painting evokes a sense of relativity and of perspective in our way of seeing things. Naturally, it enables us to detach ourselves from our intricate involvement in the human world and to expand our minds to become identical with endless space.

A further exploration of this theme can be found in *Which Is Earth? C.* (Fig. 42). Here, against a background half filled with the familiar fiber textures of his paintings, are three globes, all different in size. In the center above is the medium-size one, a combination of yellow and black intricately and dramatically organized. Below it on the right is the small one, also in yellow and black more horizontally spread. The third globe can be seen only in one section, in the lower left corner of the painting, which is filled with the typical elements of Liu's paintings: large dark patches and white areas with some fiber streaks spread around. This three-way relationship increases the drama of the cosmic movement. The viewer seems to be floating in space, not connected with any one of the three, but feeling and thinking about them all.

The most ambitious work of this group is *Which Is Earth? No. 1, No. 2, No. 3* (Fig. 43), a set of three separate pieces all with a combination of a sphere above and a stretch of landscape below. The three make up one single composition, giving the idea of three equal size spheres above one broad stretch of ground surface that curves through all three panels. The idea of three panels in one composition is apparently a traditional idea from screen paintings or scroll sets, in which all pieces form one composition together but each has a self-sufficient form of its own. The treatment of



**FIG. 42** Liu Kuo-sung, *Which Is Earth? C*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 45.75 x 30.79 in (116.2 x 78.2 cm)  
Private collection, Taiwan



**FIG. 43** Liu Kuo-sung, *Which is Earth No.1*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper  
52.68 × 30.71 in (134 × 78 cm)



**Which is Earth No.2**, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper  
54.53 × 30.71 in (138.5 × 78 cm)



**Which is Earth? No.3**, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper  
52.68 × 30.63 in (133.8 × 77.8 cm)  
Collection of National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung

the three globes shows a great variation. The left one is done by large ink patches, the middle one by atmospheric effect, and the right one in more complex, minute technique. The relationship between the three and the one is another interesting development.

Another more intricate variation of this theme is *A Moon for All Seasons* (Fig. 44) which consists of five square panels put together in the form of a cross. In the center is the moon, the sphere in yellow with dark patches of ink placed in the center of the panel against a plain background. On its right is the spring panel, with green as the main color mixed with patches of black, hovering above two collage patches below suggestive of the appearance of rain and clouds and green foliage on earth. The summer panel is above, with a red sun on the upper left corner and dark patches suggestive of dry rocks below. On the left is the autumn panel, with yellow the symbolic color in a sweep that begins in the upper left down the lower right in an S-curve, as if leaves are flowing downstream toward the waterfall below. The winter panel, as expected, is the familiar snow scene, with the light and dark contrast. In all, many of his various techniques were used to achieve the effect. Liu mentioned that this



**FIG. 44** Liu Kuo-sung, *A Moon for All Seasons*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 61.81 × 61.81 in (157 × 157 cm)

composition also was inspired by the multi-screen movies which he saw in Expo 67 at Montreal. But this modern cinematic technique is combined with the traditional Chinese concept of a set of four scrolls or a four-panel screen showing the four seasons. Thus in all these developments there is the same persistent attempt in Liu Kuo-sung to pull together what seem to be very divergent ideas: ancient and modern, Chinese and Western, landscape and abstraction.

### Ideas on Art

As seen in many of the quotations above, Liu Kuo-sung is one of the most articulate writers and speakers among the artists in Taiwan today. Although the basic means of his expression is painting, he did aspire to be a poet when he was in high school. Since he became seriously committed to painting, he has been very much involved in ideas and theories on art. On his book shelves are books on both Chinese and Western art theory which he consults quite often for purposes of writing and speaking. As mentioned before, many of the articles written by him for periodicals and newspapers have been collected in two books. In them are found some of the clearest expressions of his ideas on art.

One of the major articles dealing with his ideas is "Painting and Nature," which first appeared in a journal called *Architecture*, a bimonthly, in 1965. A number of passages can be quoted here:

Earlier Western painting did not get seriously involved in the mind and character of the individual, but followed the faithful depiction of external nature. But after Kant proposed the statement of subjective character, "Beauty can only be felt through the mind," Hegel followed with the idea that the nature of beauty was 'infinity' and 'freedom.' Nature is limited, controlled by the law of necessity, thus occupying the lowest place in the ranking of beauty. On the other hand, nothing is more boundless and free than the mind, so that the highest form of beauty is always the expression of the mind. Imitation of nature definitely cannot produce the highest form of expression. The goal of art is to transcend the restrictions of nature and to express the freedom of the mind. Only an art of pure expression of the mind can attain the highest form of beauty. Therefore, rejection of the traditional view toward nature brought about the destruction of external nature in expressionism and cubism, the trend toward the expression of the individual mind and eventually the road into the abstract realm of pure expression of the mind....

Some people feel that some of my recent paintings simply depict landscape. This does not bother me. However, I am opposed to the conscious depiction of landscape or nature, since if each painter, before he starts painting, consciously paints a mountain, a stretch of water, or a house or a group of people, this kind of consciousness constitutes a restriction of the artist's mind. Any restriction of the mind will hurt the creative freedom of the painter. The whole history of art is a history of the artist's struggle to free himself of the restrictions on the mind, and of his fight for the freedom of expression. While restrictions of tools and materials are external, objective, and easy to overcome, restrictions of the mind are internal, subjective, and difficult to overcome. This is because one is not aware of the

prison imposed on our mind. However, if an artist who has no mental burden or worry except his desire to paint discovers some feeling for landscape in his work after its completion, what does it matter to the artist?

In the idea of creative work, I feel that the greatest reason for me to express myself through abstract form is an urgent inner demand to search for the essence of nature and to seek for the chief meaning of those objects that can be seen and felt. Abstraction is a way to distill the character, spirit and power inside nature. Thus abstraction becomes a highly accurate method and tool. To abstract is to distill, and to distill is to increase the strength and thickness to enable the sublimation of natural shapes and phenomena into the "ch'an" of painting, with its roots in an active, moving, and rhythmic mind. To continue with this kind of mind will become a great joy for us.<sup>7</sup>

Liu's view of art history, in both Western and Chinese art, is very much in agreement with the ideas stated above. But for Chinese painting, he feels that Ch'an has been influential in shaping the development of literati painting. Just as an artist goes through the three steps of "realistic depiction," "spirit grasping," and "mystical awakening" in his own development, so the history of art seems to have developed along the same line. As he describes it, "Ch'an is the absolute stillness in motion and the absolute motion in stillness; though dark, it shines forever; though shining, it is forever dark; motion and stillness are the two things that can explore into the original source of life itself. The highest expression in art is to "go beyond the shapes," which was the goal for T'ang poets as well as for Su Shih, Mi Fei, Liang K'ai, Ma Yuan and Hsia Kuei, Ni Tsan and Huang Kung-wang, and Shih-t'ao and Chu Ta. However, he regretted that even the last two, Shih-t'ao and Chu Ta, attained only semi-abstraction and failed to reach total abstraction, the highest realm of Ch'an expression,

It is undoubtedly for this reason that he feels abstract painting is a logical development of modern Chinese art. Abstract painting, like Ch'an, which combines ideas from Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian schools into one, can resolve all the contradictions into a great unity, an attainment where both mind and objects are blended into the Ch'an. Quoting from a lecture on "Ch'an and Ink Painting" given by Tseng Yu to members of the Association of Ink Painters, of which Liu himself is president, he finds that a painting which can attain the highest expression of the spirit of Ch'an must be one that looks like landscape but is not a landscape and that can resolve all the contradictions into the complete unity of blending the mind and the object.<sup>8</sup> It is this kind of expression that Liu seeks in his paintings. Among contemporary painters, he is undoubtedly one of the most successful in attaining this Ch'an spirit.

If there is an underlying philosophy in Liu Kuo-sung, it is that art is a way of life. As indicated before, from early childhood his strong desire to paint has grown to be stronger and stronger. Through poverty and suffering, he never wavered or turned to something else, but followed his own pursuit with greater and greater determination. In a way, art gave him the strength to resist all the hardships he went through. For many other painters, such a difficult life could easily lead to an art of social protest and criticism. But perhaps under the strong influence of the traditional Chinese approach, which turned away from overt realism, his painting is a way of searching for some meaning to life. The more

one gets involved in art, the more one is elevated out of ordinary existence to come close to the divine.

Unlike the Existentialist, he never rejects life or finds life meaningless. In fact, he loves life. He loves to meet people and to travel around. Though neither a smoker nor drinker, he naturally enjoys eating. To him life, regardless of how miserable it is sometimes, is worth living. Perhaps this is typical of the people of our time who went through the Depression and the World War. In China, all the years of war and struggle have given strength to many people. In Taiwan, one of the most interesting groups of people consists of those young refugee students from the mainland. Separated from their families on the mainland, and living alone in their most active years, without security and without help, they worked hard, educated themselves, and, in the case of quite a few of them, achieved some degree of success on their own. Some became leading writers or critics, others artists and movie directors. Liu is one of them.

If there is a goal in Liu's art, it is the traditional one sought by most of the painters in the last one thousand years in China. Art must elevate people to a higher realm, above all the pettiness of daily life. It must give a sense of serenity that comes close to the ideals of both Ch'an and Taoism. In this connection, art must not address the senses, but must point directly to the spirit. Leaving all the dazzling attractions of everyday existence behind, it guides people toward a simple, unpretentious but meaningful life. Loneliness, frustration, and despair, so often found in major Western artists, thus have no place in his art. In this, he is an optimist, capable of liberating himself from the dusty world to achieve a spiritual identity with the great universe.

To achieve this goal, his art went through periods of experiments, from the more complex, more earthly depictions to the more simple, more concentrated, and more symbolic expressions. Following the traditional Chinese artists, he gradually turned away from bright and rich colors and concentrated on black and white. Giving up realistic figures and objects, he turned to more and more abstract forms. The result is a world of pure form, where no human trace can be found, and where one's spirit can move freely and dramatically, to find meaning in the movements, contrasts, variations, and changes and transformations.

All these are achieved by pulling together elements from the East and West. They are so perfectly blended that one finds it hard to separate one from another. The dark patches and white streaks seen to be traditional enough, for Chinese painters have used them for almost a thousand years. But when one travels on an airplane, either over the Rockies or the Alps, he will be surprised to find that the mountains and snow below seem to have come from Liu's paintings. Similarly, what he has painted seems to have anticipated the new discoveries in space exploration. This ability to evoke associations from both the old and the new and from both the East and West is part of the greatness of his works. To many Western artists and writers, all the new scientific and space developments will lead to nothing but woes for mankind. Liu, however, does not see things in the same way. Following traditional Chinese thinkers, he does not think of the universe only in human terms, but broadens his outlook so much that he seems to be able to harmonize man and the universe into one great unity, the achievement of some of the great landscape painters of China. From this point of view, there is valid reason for optimism in his abstract paintings.

All great artists must be measured by the breadth and depth of their achievements. In the case of Liu Kuo-sung, the chain of

associations evoked by his works of the last several years, as has been discussed above, is a good testimony of the breadth of his work. The memories of the Chinese landscape tradition—an expression of Chinese inner aspirations—and brushwork marvels indicating the artist's personal values and taste, together with the theories and expressions of Westerners in their quest for pure formal excellence and for spiritual expression, all have been skillfully and firmly blended together by Liu into an expression of his own. While recent developments in the West tend to emphasize the rebellion of artists against their society or even the rejection of life itself, Liu's art seems to have followed the Chinese artistic tradition, in which the artists, regardless of how ugly or violent their age and society, always take a Buddhist or Taoist view in attempting to look beyond the mere pettiness and miseries of everyday life to find a world that is aesthetically beautiful and spiritually transcendental and that cultivates and develops our urge for high inner attainments. For those in search of such a paradise, Liu Kuo-sung has created an image of it that will never be forgotten.

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\*Unless otherwise indicated, all images in this article are courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.

## Notes

- 1 [“Liu Kuo-sung, “Huihua shi yitiao jianku de licheng” [Painting is a Very Difficult Journey], *Yitan* [Art World] 13 (April 1969): 21-29. For further information on this art journal, see <https://collections.nmth.gov.tw/CollectionContent.aspx?z=132&rno=2004.007.0713> (accessed Dec. 8 2021). Please note that the Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese names and terms originally used by Chu-tsing Li have been retained in this reprint for historical accuracy, as pinyin was not internationally used at the time of publication in 1969.]
- 2 [Please note that all English translations of Liu Kuo-sung's writings within this essay are by Chu tsing-li himself.]
- 3 [Ton Fan Huahua, or Eastern Painting Group.]
- 4 [“Zhongguo xiandai huihua zhi lu,” *Wenxing congkan* (Wenxing book series), 152, no. 4 (1966)].
- 5 [The conventionally accepted English title of this work today is *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains*. Authority of the Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.]
- 6 [All the provenances for artworks by Liu Kuo-sung provided by Chu-tsing Li in this essay reflect the whereabouts of these works in 1969, at the time of the essay's publication, and are preserved here for historical reference. The provenances shown in the captions, however, are current as of the publication of *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader*, March 2022.]
- 7 [*Chien Chu Architecture Bimonthly* (Jianzhu shuangyuan) (April 1963): 1-2. Please note: When Chu-tsing Li's essay was published, in the 1969 exhibition catalogue *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist*, Li provided an incorrect citation in his footnote for Liu Kuo-sung's article “Painting and Nature,” quoted above. It has been corrected here.]
- 8 [Liu Kuo-sung, “Chanzong meixue yu shuimohua—Jishu Zeng Yu xiansheng bufen yanjiang” (Chan Aesthetics and Ink Painting—Impressions of a Lecture by Mr. Zeng Yu), *Youshi wenyi* (Young Lions Magazine of Literature and the Arts) 29, no. 6 (December 1969): 29-32. Excerpted and translated in this *Reader*, 63-64.]

*Unmeltable Ice Mountain*, 1982

Ink and color on paper

13.54 × 12.44 in (34.4 × 31.6 cm)

Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei



*White Snow is White, 1982*

Ink and color on paper

15.43 x 17.52 in (39.2 x 44.5 cm)

Water, Pine and Stone Retreat

Collection, England



*The Vast Yellow River, 1983*

Ink and color on paper

54.33 × 27.36 in (138 × 69.5 cm)

National Art Museum of China, Beijing

*Mountain Light Blown  
into Wrinkles, 1985*

Ink and color on paper

15.75 × 10.43 in (40 × 26.5 cm)

Water, Pine and Stone Retreat  
Collection, England





五八九一 刘国强

***Midnight Sun, 1972***

Mixed media

60.24 x 209.84 in (153 x 533 cm)

Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong





Liu Kuo-sung

Aida Yuen Wong

Hugh Moss

Liu Zijian

Chen Juo-hsi

Yu Kwang-chung

Wu Guanzhong

David Teh-yu Wang

**On Technique in Painting** (1976)

**Ink Painting in the Sinophone World:  
Liu Kuo-sung's Hong Kong Period** (2019)

**The Four Seasons Handscroll** (1985)

**"I Hear Your Voice, My Country"  
A Cross-Sectional Analysis of Liu Guosong's Impact  
on Modern Chinese Ink Painting** (1996)

**Tradition and Anti-Tradition:  
On Liu Kuo-sung's Retrospective Exhibition** (1985)

**Nature Proposes, Art Disposes:  
The Metaphysical Landscape of Liu Kuo-sung** (1992)

**Unique, Dream-like, Metaphoric:  
On Liu Kuo-sung's Retrospective Exhibition** (1992)

**The Disk in the Paintings of Liu Kuo-sung** (1991)

Liu Kuo-sung

ON TECHNIQUE IN PAINTING

1976

1.

The issues of tools, materials, and technique are essential to all workings of the human consciousness, whether academic, technical, or artistic, but are especially important in art.

An artist who wishes to express himself or herself must first possess the techniques of such expression. Technique is a question of mastering tools and exploiting materials. While tools, materials, and techniques seem unrelated, they are in fact a trinity and always inextricable from each other.

Painting techniques determine the tools and materials used because every tool has its specific uses, and every material its specific properties. Using a particular tool and a particular material to maximize their effect is the artist's task and responsibility. In Chinese painting, the primary tool is the brush, and the primary material is ink. For this reason, discussions of technique in Chinese painting have centered on *bimo* ["brush-and-ink"]. Since I have already discussed this issue at length in my essay "On *Bimo*" (in my book *The Path of Modern Chinese Painting* (*Zhongguo xiandai hua de lu*) published by Zhuanji wenxue chuban she in Taipei), I will not repeat myself here and will discuss issues other than *bimo*.

2.

Undeniably, most mockery and dismissal of modern painting has focused on technique. Some people ask, "How does rubbing a dirty rag on a canvas count as painting?" Others say, "Isn't abstract painting trivial? Even my three-year-old son can do it. All it takes is to splatter some paint on a canvas." In reality, however, abstract painting is beyond the son's abilities and even the parent's. The reason is simply that they do not have the training. They do not know how, where, or from what height to splatter the paint, or at what angle, or with what force, or what colors to mix together, or when to stop pouring and deem the painting finished. A true modern artist, on the other hand, *does* know these things, because he or she has undergone rigorous foundational training, possesses a general knowledge of modern painting, understands new aesthetic concepts, and functions on a higher plane of imagination and intellect than the average person. The philistines who dismiss abstract painting have seen only paintings that faithfully depict familiar objects, one brushstroke at a time, and can hardly even countenance a "splattered" painting. Convinced that abstract painters are charlatans hoodwinking their viewers, they angrily protest against and heap insult upon their art. In reality, however, modern painters have no malintents. Consider the pained expression on American Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock's face while he painted (in the Museum of Modern Art's 1970 catalog).<sup>1</sup> If he were a teenager, we might think it was all a joke, but it is impossible to believe that this middle-aged man was in any sort of mischievous mood. If Pollock were mentally

confused, we might dismiss his splatterings as meaningless accidents, but he was in fact a highly sophisticated painter with a rigorous mastery of his medium. We must pause to consider that museums around the world are eager to collect his paintings, and that art historians deem him one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. All this cannot be without reason. When we review our nation's art history, we realize that "splattered" or "splashed ink" was a recognizable painting technique already during the Tang dynasty. It is nothing new. In *Record of Famous Painters of the Tang Dynasty* (*Tangchao minghua lu*), Zhu Jingxuan wrote of a certain "Wang Mo," or "Ink Wang": "Neither his birthplace nor his real given name is known. He was an expert at splattering ink in his landscape paintings, so that his contemporaries called him 'Ink Wang.' He spent a great deal of time wandering through the river and lake region, and was always painting landscapes, pines and rocks, or various kinds of trees. In his nature there was a good deal of wildness, and he loved wine. His usual practice when he was ready to paint a hanging picture was to begin by drinking. When he was drunk, he would splatter ink on it, laughing or singing the while. He might kick it, or rub it on with his hands, wave (his brush) about or scrub with it. There (the ink) would lie pale and here dark; he would follow its configurations to make mountains, or rocks, or clouds, or water. The response of hand to thought was as swift as Creation itself. He would bring out clouds and mist, and wash in wind and rain, exactly as if his cunning were a god's. One can look closely and see no trace of the ink blots, a fact that everyone finds miraculous."<sup>2</sup> (Wang Mo was the same painter recorded elsewhere as Wang Xia.) From this passage, we learn that Wang Xia did not only splatter ink but also employed other techniques, such as smearing and scrubbing. Viewers and intellectuals of his time did not sneer at him, but indeed afforded him high praise: Zhu Jingxuan listed him first in the "untrammeled" class of painters. The Yuan-dynasty critic Tang Hou, in his *Examination of Paintings Ancient and Modern* (*Gujin huajian*), commented that "Wang Xia splattered ink to form landscapes, which, faint and subtle like misty vapors, were free from the constraints of brush and ink. In my youth I saw one of his paintings. It was of considerable artistry and magnitude. Only now as I remember it do I realize it was a painting by Wang Xia, but I am unable to view it again." Tang Yin, in *Liuru jushi huapu*, which he edited, was likewise very complimentary towards the painter: "Wang Xia was skilled at painting in splattered ink with a drunken brush. He was therefore the founder of the untrammeled class of painters." If "splashed ink" were meritless charlatanism, why would a renowned scholar and master painter like Tang Yin approve of it? If it were easy to execute, why would Gu Kuang, Wang Xia's only disciple, fail to leave behind any works of note? Mi Fu's cloudy mountains were inspired by Wang Xia's splattered ink, and Liang Kai was the only painter to capture the essence of his style. Why was there nobody else? Today, more

than a millennium later, Mr. Zhang Daqian, the heralded master of Chinese painting, has also foregone brushwork in favor of splattering ink and pigments. This transformation cannot be explained simply by Mr. Zhang's failing eyesight.

Very early on, Chinese painters were aware of the limitations of the brush, especially in capturing fleeting sensations. Therefore some painters gave up the brush in pursuit of alternative expressive methods and techniques. Along with "splashed ink," finger painting emerged as one such alternative. Zou Yigui wrote of finger painting in his *Xiaoshan huapu*, "Zhang Zao of the Tang dynasty painted with his hands (as *Shutong lunhua* has it, he 'painted only with blunt brushes, and sometimes by rubbing the silk with his hand'). Once Bi Hong had seen [Zhang Zao's painting], he exclaimed in astonishment and asked from whom Zao had learned [his techniques]. Zao replied: 'Externally all Creation is my master. Internally I have found the mind's sources.' Among painters of recent times, Gao Qipei is proficient in finger painting and refers to it as *zhitou shenghuo* ["making a living with fingers," also translatable as "vitality at fingertips"]. His human figures, landscapes, fowl, and fish are all full of vitality.... Gao Qipei originally practiced brush painting, but, burdened by having to paint for social obligations, switched to finger painting. There is not a single competent finger painter who is not also adept in brush painting. If a charlatan attempts to imitate [Gao] without having mastered the brush, he will surely 'fail to paint the tiger [and get a dog instead],' inflicting disaster upon ink and paper and polluting the viewer's eyesight. How is that not laughable?"<sup>3</sup>

Here I am reminded of an amusing anecdote. In the early 1960s, the National Museum of History in Taipei solicited modern paintings from around Taiwan as potential submissions to the 6th São Paulo Biennial. When I brought my painting to the museum on the day of the deadline, I ran into Chang P'eng-Yuan [Zhang Pengyuan], a classmate from Normal University and a graduate of the history department. (At the time he was a graduate student at Normal University and working as a researcher at the Museum of History. Currently, he is employed at Academic Sinica.) He showed me a painting and said, "Many painters have looked at this painting and called it most excellent, possibly the very best among all the works we've received. But I don't understand why it's good. Please explain to me." I was confused by his bizarre statement. The "painting" was clearly a worthless piece of garbage and unbearable to look at. It employed some "splashed ink" techniques, as well as brushwork that vaguely resembled Action Painting, but the execution was appalling. I studied it for a few moments while four or five of Chang's colleagues stared at me solemnly, waiting for me to open my mouth. I told them, "I don't know who painted this, and I don't care what others have said. This may be the very worst abstract painting I've ever seen."

"Why?" Chang P'eng-Yuan asked.

"I dare say that whoever painted this not only is incapable of painting but also has no understanding whatsoever of abstract painting. He himself doesn't even know why the painting looks like this."

Suddenly laughter erupted all around me, confusing me all the more. I wondered if I had said something wrong.

"I'm the one who painted it!" Chang P'eng-Yuan finally told me, laughing. "So you painters aren't just messing around after all."

I left the office with conflicted feelings. On the one hand, I had been the victim of a prank. On the other hand, I was gratified by the thought that after this incident they probably would stop

stereotyping modern painters as fraudulent. But a question still pained me: why did highly educated intellectuals, including even my own friend, think so poorly of modern art? This was a problem. Upon reflection, I realized that there were not enough occasions to exhibit and introduce modern painting, and not enough effort in explaining and promoting it. Moreover, being preoccupied with work, intellectuals had too few opportunities to be exposed to modern art, creating a barrier to their understanding.

### 3:

In the West, scientific advancement has created complex industrial societies with many points of interface with individuals. The daily lives, thought, and emotions of humans have likewise been transformed and become increasingly complicated. Artists who wish to represent rapidly evolving contemporary realities can no longer rely on artforms of the past. Thanks to advancements in communication, Western artists have come to learn about the insouciantly expressive Chinese *xieyi* painting tradition, and begun to experiment with finger painting and the "splashed ink" technique. Furthermore, in order to create their personal aesthetics and to satisfy their expressive needs, they have adopted many novel formal devices and modified and experimented with new materials. Consequently, painting is no longer merely a matter of applying pigments on a canvas, and whatever serves the purpose of expression is permissible. Sand, cloth, paper, asphalt, tree bark, plaster, newsprint—all these can be incorporated as artistic materials. While Western artists are inspired by Chinese painting techniques, they have explored their possibilities with greater fervor. Some people are concerned that these developments may subvert the definition of "painting." They wonder whether the activities of "painters" nowadays still qualify as "painting/drawing" (*hui*), as opposed to "fabricating" (*zhi*). This may be the one of the nuanced questions that I face today. Of course, I have never felt the need to settle on a narrow definition of "painting," knowing that definitions are not too important. Paintings do not have to be painted. Indeed, Wang Xia did not paint his "paintings" with a brush, nor did Liang Kai always "write" (*xie*) his paintings with one.

Aside from the two methods mentioned above, there were many other methods in traditional Chinese painting. For example, Song Di wrote, "Painting should possess natural flavor. You should first look for a damaged wall, and then stretch plain silk against it. Gaze at it day and night. When you have looked for a sufficient length of time, you will see through the silk the high and low parts, or curves and angles, on the surface of the wall, which will take on the appearance of landscape. As you hold this in your mind and your eyes consider it, the high parts will become mountains and the low parts water; crevices will become valleys and cracks, torrents; the prominent parts will seem to be the foreground and the obscure, the distance. As your spirit leads and your imagination constructs, you will see indistinctly the images of human beings, birds, grasses, and trees, flying or moving about. Once they are complete in your eyes, then follow your imagination to command your brush. Silently, through your intuitive apprehension, the natural scene will be spontaneously achieved, and [hence] it will be unlike the work of men; this is called the 'live brush.'"<sup>4</sup>

Deng Chun wrote in his *Huaji zashuo*, "According to tradition, Yang Huizhi and Wu Daozi both learned under the same master. Daozi was accomplished in his studies, hence Huizhi was afraid of being compared with Wu's fame, and instead became a sculptor.

[In their areas] both men were first in the world. Consequently, in the central plains area of the north, there are many of Yang Huizhi's landscapes modeled on walls. When Guo Xi saw them, he produced a new concept. He ordered the plasterers to cease using their spatulas and to simply push the plaster onto the walls with their hands, no matter that it was here concave or there convex. When it was dry, he traced the outlines with ink, turning them into mountain peaks and forested valleys, and adding such things as buildings and human figures. It was as if created by heaven. They were called 'shadow walls.' Afterwards, such compositions were extremely common. This was a reinterpretation of Song Di's stretching of silk over ruined walls.<sup>5</sup> Song Di, Yang Huizhi, and Guo Xi alike exploited an uneven ground to suggest convexity and concavity in a landscape without using a brush. How is their art any different than modern paintings, with their manifestly uneven surfaces? They are exactly the same in their shared desire to break free from the two-dimensionality of painting and suggest space. Guo Xi's "shadow walls" even anticipated the merging of painting and sculpture in modern art. People puzzled by Western painters using spray guns to apply paint onto their canvases might be less so if they knew about Guo Xi's "pushed plaster" technique. Indeed, we may say that these painting techniques, whether ancient or modern, Chinese or foreign, illuminate each other and serve the same artistic ends. Fang Xun [1736–1799 CE] wrote in his *Shanjingju hualun*, "Painters of clouds know only about rendering them with diffused washes, drawn outlines, or scattered white powder, but the ancients had ways to [render clouds] without using a brush at all. Their clouds appeared as a suffusing atmosphere, miraculous in their amorphous boundlessness. Zhang Yanyuan wrote, 'The ancients did not reach this final subtlety in their painting of clouds: If one moistens silk, dotting and filling in here and there with a light powder blown from the mouth, this is known as blown clouds.' Chen Weiyin [Chen Ruyan] discussed with Wang Meng how to refine his *Mount Tai in Heavy Snow*. [They settled] on using a small bamboo bow to project white powder onto the snowy areas and captured the form of snow dancing in the wind. I tried to recreate their method, which resulted in a painting of unusual appeal."<sup>6</sup> That which cannot be expressed with brush and ink requires a painter to create new methods and find new paths. All these, in the words of Shitao, "come from [the painter's] awareness."<sup>7</sup> Not everyone can understand it.

Regarding the tools that Mi Fu used for painting, Zhao Xihu wrote the following record in *Dongtian xinlu*: "Nangong [i.e. Mi Fu] did not use a brush exclusively in his ink play. He could make paintings with paper fibers, sugarcane bagasse, or lotus pods. He did not use sized paper and refused to work on silk."

These historical painters used alternative tools and methods for no other reason than to express what was in their hearts. Their creativity, unconstrained by the rules of tradition, is beyond the imagination and knowledge of conservative painters single-mindedly devoted to copying the classics.

Aside from the examples mentioned above, there were innumerable other unusual techniques involving silk, paper, and brush. Historical documents mention painters painting with a carpenter's "inked ruler" (*mochi*) [a thread soaked in ink used to mark lumber] and with their own hair dipped in ink, as well as such techniques as "water painting" (suspending ink in water and imprinting its patterns on paper), "fire painting" (using incense sticks to burn or char outlines on paper), lacquer painting, and embroidered painting. Some of these are lost to history. Others survive in artisanal

crafts, marginalized and afforded little importance. Perhaps literati painters of the past also recognized the unusual effects of these techniques and their expressive variety, but they permitted them only in small quantities and not as mainstays of painting. Invariably, Chinese painters affirmed the orthodox centrality and universal value of the brush.

#### 4.

Some say that the true meaning of art lies in manifesting an artist's consciousness and not technical and formal issues. I do not oppose this view and indeed agree with it emphatically. But we should understand that an artist's consciousness is only significant if it is expressed and made perceptible to others. Only then can it circulate in society and enrich the spiritual life and cultural heritage of humanity at large. Surely we do not value idle fantasies that are never articulated! As [Conrad] Fiedler writes, "Philosophy is of artistic value only if it is expressed with the techniques of language. What philosophers, aestheticians, and critics in general reject is technique divorced from the artist's spirit and consciousness—such technique is nothing more than manual action and a skill of imitation. It is not true technique."<sup>8</sup>

The technique that I have been discussing is precisely what Fiedler calls "true technique." It is not divorced from consciousness, but rather serves to express the artist's thoughts and feelings. It sustains art's vitality in concrete and practical ways. Shitao, in his *Recorded Remarks on Painting (Huayu lu)*, explains the essence of technique: "Establish one's spirit amidst a sea of ink tones; create vitality with the peak of the brush. On a simple piece of paper, bring about a complete metamorphosis; let light shine forth thorough Primordial Confusion. Even if the brushstrokes fail to resemble proper brushstrokes, even if the ink seems unlike ink while the painting fails to resemble a painting, my self will still be present through it all."<sup>9</sup>

Many art theorists fail to grasp the essence of art, however hard they try, because they lack a fundamental understanding of technique. As Pierre Gaustalla writes, "Art is a perpetual effort in the refinement of technique, aimed at artistic effects, in order to solve a variety of practical issues. When we judge a work of art, we begin by analyzing its technique."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, one who does not truly understand technique cannot grasp the essence of art. An artist without true technique is not a true artist.

Someone once said, "Art only begins where technique ends." But do not misunderstand this statement as a negation of technique. Rather, it points to "technique after the mastery of traditional techniques," "technique of no technique," and "perfection of technique." Art is utmost freedom, but it is also subject to utmost constraints. At the beginning one must follow rules, but in time one must transcend them. This does not mean breaking rules or that rules do not exist. It means mastering rules and using them freely rather than being enslaved by them. Ultimately, the painter should transcend rules and attain a harmonious union with them.

#### 5.

Literati painting is founded on the notion that "calligraphy and painting have the same origin" (*shuhua tongyuan*). Do calligraphy and painting indeed share the same origin? No! What they have in common is only the brush. Literati painters produced an

increasingly rich theoretical discourse on the use of the brush, the tool with which they both wrote and painted. By purporting a close relationship between calligraphy and painting and introducing calligraphic brushwork into painting, they even managed to redefine painting as an act of "writing" (*xie*), as opposed to "fabricating" (*zhi*) and "painting/drawing" (*hui*) as had been the case earlier. Moreover, because calligraphers tended to write with an upright brush with a centered tip (*zhongfeng*), they advocated the same in painting. Over time, the primacy of "writing" drove Chinese painting into an impasse. Painters uncritically indoctrinated in literati theory even proclaimed that a painting could not be good unless it was painted with a centered tip and celebrated as "true virtuosity" brushwork executed with a sheep's hair brush but with the force of a wolf's hair brush. For centuries, painters devoted their lives to honing the latter dubious skill. If the effect of a wolf's hair brush was the goal, why not simply use a wolf's hair brush? What was the point of spending decades to perfectly replicate the effect of one kind of brush with another? The literati painters missed a crucial point: every tool or material has its own unique properties, and the artist should exploit and manifest them to the greatest extent rather than suppressing or replacing them. Imagine how laughable it would be to use hemp paper to approximate the effect of *xuan* paper! An artist who does so no longer has mastery over tools and materials and has instead become their servant. What I have described above was truly a lamentable development in the history of Chinese painting.

I often thought that, in order to rescue Chinese painting from the absurdism of literati theory and from unthinking copyism, the young generation of Chinese painters must stage a revolution. What must be overturned? The twin hegemonies of the centered tip and the brush! We painters must come to the sober realization that the brush is but one tool among many and that centered-tip brushwork is likewise only one among myriad possible techniques, with its specific expressive possibilities and constraints. As creators, we have the freedom to reject the authority of the centered tip (Ma Yuan and Xia Gui of the Southern Song dynasty are renowned for their "axe-cut" texture strokes, executed with a tilted brush) and the freedom not to use a brush at all (like Mi Fu and Wang Meng in the anecdotes related above). To satisfy our expressive needs, we have the right to choose any suitable tool and method. In the 1960s, I began to put my thoughts into practice, experimenting with many different tools, materials, and techniques in order to free myself from the constraints of the centered tip. In 1961, I abandoned the brush altogether and began to incorporate rubbings into my paintings for their novel visual effects. By 1963, when I picked up the brush again, I had a completely different emotional and physical relationship to it and manipulated it to completely different expressive ends, even though I could still summon my classical training with my hand. As a consequence of my "revolution against the brush," the established classical manners disappeared from my practice, replaced by a completely new form of painting.

## 6.

The realization of a technique varies with materials and tools. An artist must first select materials and tools suitable to his or her expressive purposes. A technically deficient artist is stymied by the properties of materials and tools, but a technically refined artist uses them to his or her advantage, assimilating them into his or her technique and personal style. The properties of materials

and tools are finite, but there are infinite ways to exploit them for expressive purposes, as I have already discussed at length above. Take an oil painter for example. Aside from painting with a brush, he or she can also scrape the painting with a palette knife, rub it his or her hand, scratch it with a bamboo strip, beat it with a rod, shoot it with a spray gun, hire a human model to crawl on it, run over it with a car, light it on fire, pour water over it, rotate it on a wheel, or have live fish bounce up and down on it. The possibilities of technique are infinite, and for this reason every tool or material can generate myriad forms of painting. Is the same not true for ink painting? After being exposed to modern Western painting, I became convinced that ink painting can likewise be reformed and expanded. I abandoned canvas painting in 1959 and have since painted with ink on paper exclusively. I have also been vocal in calling for more artists to join me in my efforts.

The reformation and expansion of ink painting that I envision implies freeing myself from traditional materials. The paper that I use, for example, is unlike paper used by traditional painters and has been specially developed for me by the Taiwan Cotton Paper Manufactory. My "brushes" are also different than classical ones: I paint with palm bark, rolls of cotton paper, and large brushes meant for cleaning cannons. I do not use ink ground slowly from an ink stick, but rather bottled liquid ink normally used in architectural drawing. Since my materials are different, I of course must also adapt my technique. To serve my expressive needs, I created a new kind of paper, and in response to its special properties I innovated a new technique called "plucking tendons and stripping skin" (*choujin bopi*) [involving manually tearing and extracting paper fibers]. By this technique I have created "white lines" in Chinese painting, an embodiment of the Daoist dualism of yin and yang. This technique is personal, and I dare say unprecedented. It is the crystallization of my thoughts and feelings and intimately connected to my pulse and breath. It is one with my life.

I promote and celebrate ink art in the hopes that more modern painters will join me in developing it and that we can support each other along the way. I believe that just as oil painters have forged a great number of new paths and created many different schools and styles, ink painters can likewise create countless paths, styles, and schools of their own. As long as we each stay true to our paths and innovate techniques and styles unique to ourselves, a glorious future surely awaits us.

Revised on October 25th, 1976, at The Chinese University of Hong Kong

(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

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## Notes

- 1 [The editors were unable to identify this catalog.]
- 2 [Translation from Alexander Soper, "T'ang Ch'ao Ming Hua Lu: The Famous Painters of the T'ang Dynasty," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 4 (1950): 20.]
- 3 [Part of this translation is adapted from Susan Bush and Hsiao-yen Shih, *Early Texts on Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 65.]
- 4 [Translation adapted from Bush and Shih, 121.]
- 5 [Translation adapted from Bush and Shih, 122.]
- 6 [Translation partially adapted from Bush and Shih, 63.]
- 7 [Translation from Shih-t'ao, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*, trans. Richard Strassberg (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), 71.]
- 8 [The editors were unable to source the original quotation.]
- 9 [Shih-t'ao, 71.]
- 10 [The editors were unable to source the original quotation.]

*Which is Earth No.2, 1969*

Ink and acrylic with collage on paper

54.53 x 30.71 in (138.5 x 78 cm)



# INK PAINTING IN THE SINOPHONE WORLD: LIU KUO-SUNG'S HONG KONG PERIOD

2019

**LIU KUO-SUNG IS A RENOWNED INK ARTIST** of the Sinophone world. Born in Anhui in 1932, he spent his childhood and early adolescence in mainland China, then migrated to Taiwan in 1949, where he received formal art education at the Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College (now National Taiwan Normal University [NTNU]). He lived and taught in Hong Kong for twenty years (1971–92), and then returned to Taiwan. At age eighty-seven, he now divides his time between Taiwan and the mainland.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, he was named the Head of the newly established Academy of Contemporary Ink Art at Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts.

The term “two coasts three places” (*liang'an sandi*) has been used since the 1990s to describe the interconnectedness of the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong without mentioning “nations” due to sensitive political differences. Few artists can better represent all three places than Liu Kuo-sung. The first part of this article follows his evolution from a Taiwanese artist to a Sinophone artist, and the second and third parts focus on Liu’s art leadership in Hong Kong. Previous studies tend to emphasize his rise in Taiwan or solo successes since the mid-1990s, but the 1970s–80s was a time when his artistic vision found a platform in Hong Kong, a then-British colony, where an ink modernization movement was already underway.

Hong Kong as a major Asian entrepôt and contact zone for Chinese and Western cultures provided unparalleled conditions for a postwar reorientation of traditionalist *guohua* (national painting) toward modern/contemporary *shuimohua* (ink painting). While this development may be seen as a precursor of what is called *shuimo* or “ink art” today, *shuimohua* and *shuimo* are not interchangeable terms.<sup>2</sup> For some, the latter signifies the end of the former. As the mainland artist Zhang Yu (b. 1959), in a 2009 exhibition he curated in Taiwan, stated: “Ink painting’ is two-dimensional and just one expressive form of ink which, it turns out, is infused with a plethora of possibilities … Possible avenues of development include performance, spatial installation, video, conceptual and composite works.”<sup>3</sup> The title of this exhibition was “The Termination of Chinese Ink Painting: Creating a Personal Contemporary Art from ‘Ink Painting’ to ‘Ink,’” with a clear message of rupture.

Multi-media deployments of ink can be observed across the Sinophone world, such as the “*Shuimo* versus *Shuimo*” exhibition by Hong Kong-based artists presented in conjunction with the 2010 Shanghai Expo. This event showcased experimental ink art since the 1990s, among them a video of ink drops gradually turning into a walking figure by Tong Wing-sze (Tang Yongshi). “*Shuimo* versus *Shuimo*” purposefully included traditional-style paintings and calligraphy, as well as modernist works by Ding Yanyong, Luis Chan (Chen Fushan), Lui Shou-kwan (Lü Shoukun), Wucius Wong (Wang Wuxie), Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun), Liu Kuo-sung (Liu Guo-song), and others. This exhibition was not intended to assert

discontinuity as Zhang Yu had, but to connect ink “vertically with the millennia of Chinese painting tradition and horizontally with new vocabulary to portray the contemporary spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

It should be stated at the outset that the purpose of this article is not to detail the transition from *shuimohua* to *shuimo*, but rather to examine the antecedent reconceptualization of *guohua* as *shuimohua* with reference to the lesser-known role of Hong Kong prior to its 1997 reintegration with China. In the wake of the cultural revolution in the 1980s, mainland artists, intellectuals, and political leaders all had a stake in reviving Chinese civilization, and this led to a comeback of ink as a vanguard medium and, later, its conceptual transformations. To historians focusing on the People’s Republic of China (PRC), this new excitement for ink was abrupt, but when analyzed in the context of the larger Sinosphere, the rise of ink as a contemporary medium could be seen as unfolding over several decades following the Second World War.

## Liu Kuo-sung’s Journey out of Taiwan and into the Sinosphere

In her pioneering *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (2007), Shu-mei Shih puts forth the idea that language, not nations and ethnicities, is the critical connection among Sinophone cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> But what counts as “language”? Is there a commonly recognized Sinitic vocabulary and grammar? One can ask the same questions regarding the visual arts. What do Chinese visual expressions look like in the present era? Following Shih’s postulations, these expressions are expected to be impure, encompassing diasporic experiences, Western contents, and more. At the same time, this does not mean the erasure of Chineseness. In this article, Sinophone art is considered with the assumption that linguistic constructs also include visual language. Dubbed the “Father of Modern Ink Painting,” Liu has made his name by championing Chinese ink as a living artistic language.

As an emerging artist in the 1950s, Liu Kuo-sung had already seen two strands of “national-style painting” (*guohua*) in Taiwan: one rising out of the idioms of the Japanese colonial era, and the other out of Chinese historical styles promoted by the Nationalist Party (Guomindang/Kuomintang) for cultural legitimization. Neither satisfied him. Taking a stance on what constituted “national” art, he protested against the inclusion of Japanized paintings (characterized by layered, opaque colors mixed with a glue binder) in the *guohua* category of the official fine arts exhibitions.<sup>6</sup>

After graduating from the NTNU in the late 1950s, Liu Kuo-sung spent a year teaching high school in Keelung, followed by a stint as a teaching assistant at the Department of Architecture at Cheng Kung University in Tainan. Meanwhile, he continued to exhibit with the Fifth Moon Group, which he had cofounded with several

of his NTNU classmates in 1956 and which, over the next dozen years, grew into a significant contemporary painting organization exhibiting works not just from Taiwan, but from the wider Sino-phone world. Noted participants included Wucius Wong of Hong Kong and Hung Hsien (Hong Xian/Margaret Chang), another alumna of NTNU who moved to the USA in 1958.<sup>7</sup> Liu's innovation during this period was the application of oil mixed with Chinese ink on plastered canvases to create free-flowing, rough textures.<sup>8</sup> His oil-and-ink combinations were tactile and visually interesting, with fluid patterns reminiscent of both American Abstract Expressionism and classical Chinese landscape painting. However, because the fragile plaster surface cracked easily, Liu soon abandoned this technique.

To modernist artists active in Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, postwar American modernism was a more accessible model for creative breakthrough. The island, under martial law during Chiang Kai-shek's rule at the time, was a closed society. The library of the United States Information Service in Taipei was one of the few places where the young Liu Kuo-sung and many of his classmates could find books and magazines about art developments around the world. But behind the Information Service was a Cold War agenda: to spread the message of American greatness and freedom from Communism.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the success of this campaign was reflected in Liu's adoption of gestural and drippy abstraction. While the modernism conveyed to the people of Taiwan was supposed to move them away from the influences of the mainland, a chance to see the Song masterpiece *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* by Fan Kuan in 1961 reignited Liu's faith in the vitality of China's historic traditions and not the Kuomintang-filtered *guohua*. From the early 1960s onward, he set his mind on making Chinese, not American or Taiwanese, paintings. In his book, *Zhongguo xiandaihua zhi lu* (*Pathways of Chinese Modern Painting*, 1965), Liu contended:

We are neither living in Song and Yuan societies, nor in Euro-American environments, (if) phony means painting old Chinese paintings, then isn't it equally (phony) when (we) paint modern paintings of the West? Imitating the new in the West cannot replace imitating the old from China. As a modern painter of China, if we want to talk about creating, then it must be a type of new painting that exists neither in China nor the West, and still belongs to China uniquely.<sup>10</sup>

His call for a transcendent Chinese art aligns with today's culturally specific but geographically open notion of Sinophone art. This does not mean that artists are from nowhere, only that neither their subjects nor sites of production must be fixed to a place and time. Articulations of such a belief point to Liu's diasporic, hybrid self-identity.

In the late 1960s, Liu Kuo-sung engaged with Space Age themes by depicting the Moon and/or the Earth as large, full circles, partial circles, or crescents in unusual colors. The clean shapes and brilliant tones of his *Space Series* of paintings (*Taikonghua*)—numbering more than 300 between 1969 and 1973—reflected his sympathy with the contemporary scientific spirit and the Hard-edge Painting Movement in the USA (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> But more importantly, this series highlighted his expansive vision about where Chinese painting could go. Along the line of widening admissible subject matters, these works made the ultimate transnational leap.



**FIG. 1** Liu Kuo-sung, *Which is Earth? No. 50*, 1969  
Ink and color on paper, 58.27 × 30.32 in (148 × 77 cm). Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection

In Taiwan in 1968, Liu Kuo-sung spearheaded a research group called the "Chinese Ink Painting Study Association" (*Zhongguo shuimohua xuehui*) to encourage reforms in Chinese painting. It had more than thirty supporters from Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>12</sup> Individual and collaborative research on techniques, materials, and tools was encouraged. Liu's earlier invention, originating in 1963, was applying ink on specially made paper with fibers that, upon their selective removal, left white tracks reminiscent of brushstrokes. He called this technique *choujin bopi* (plucked tendons, stripped skin). This dramatic and unprecedented technique defies traditional calligraphic values such as *bimo* (brush-and-ink) and *zhongfeng yongbi* (application of the centered brush tip).

Liu was not alone in trying to revise Taiwan's nation-centered discourse. In the wake of the "*guohua* orthodoxy" debates in the 1950s and 1960s, fellow artist and art critic Chu Ko (Chu Ge)



FIG. 2 Liu Kuo-sung, *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains*, 1963  
Ink and color on paper, 21.10 x 33.78 in (53.6 x 85.8 cm). Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection

likewise called for the outright abolition of *guohua*, shocking the island's art community. Later in the 1980s, Ho Huai-shuo (He Huaishuo) questioned the meaningfulness of the terms "Chinese painting" (*Zhongguohua*) and *guohua*, saying they were but synonyms of *shuimohua* (literally, water-ink painting) or ink painting. Perhaps the erasure of differences was largely tactical to shake up the status quo, but the term "*shuimohua*" continued to gain traction as a substitute for *guohua*, with no other term remotely rivaling it even to this day. Ho Huai-shuo, who taught ink painting at the Chinese Culture University in Taipei, believed that as long as this art form maintained its "unique ethno-cultural character" (*dute minzu wenhua tezhi*), it would remain valid. The contentions surrounding the term "*guohua*" stemmed from the struggles for cultural sovereignty at least since the Japanese colonial occupation (1895–1945). Many artists in postcolonial Taiwan began to entertain a way out by aligning with Western art or Asiatic practices.<sup>13</sup>

Taiwan withdrew from the United Nations in 1971, ending its formal representation of China on the international stage. The PRC took its seat. One by one, major countries severed their diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which nevertheless continued to call itself the Republic of China. In the same year that Taiwan left the United Nations, Liu Kuosung eagerly accepted the invitation to teach in the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The Hong Kong Museum of Art had purchased his *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains* (1963), done on lantern paper (Fig. 2), before he ever set foot there. This was the first time he had sold a painting, and it was a pivotal work that represented his earliest breakthrough with fibrous paper. As Hsiao Chong-ray (Xiao Qiongrui) explains:

Sometime in later 1963, Liu Kuo-sung by chance discovered that one of the paintings in his studio showed fine curvilinear patterns against thick, dark strokes, as though moving rhythmically. Upon closer inspection, he realized that this work painted on paper used for making lanterns had been turned over by the wind, and the back side showed this special effect ... Sometimes after he finished a painting, he would display the reverse side where the black (ink) that came through would contain tendon-like white marks to various effects.<sup>14</sup>

This passage describes the origination of an idea that later evolved into the "plucked tendons, stripped skin" technique. Liu went on to have "Kuo-sung paper" (*Guosong zhǐ*) made to his

specifications at a paper mill in Taipei.<sup>15</sup> But after spending two years in the USA and Europe on a John D. Rockefeller III Fund he began to reconsider his dependency on this material.<sup>16</sup> Relocating to Hong Kong in 1971 was probably the best career move for him at the time, given the limited number of faculty positions at major universities in Taiwan, especially for a rebel like him with only a bachelor's degree. The British colony provided more favorable political conditions for ink modernization than either Taiwan or the mainland could offer. Taiwan would remain under martial law that stifled free expression until 1987, while the PRC went through the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

In Hong Kong, Lui Shou-kwan had started the "New Ink Movement" (*Xin shuimo yundong*) in the late 1950s, putting the city at the forefront of ink modernization.<sup>17</sup> This movement championed Western-inspired abstraction, and also paid tribute to Hong Kong as a land and culture, as well as to age-old Chinese traditions. Reflecting on Liu Kuo-sung's position, David Clarke points out that being from Taiwan meant facing a similar challenge to Lui Shou-kwan's: that of "produc[ing] images that would be legible within the international arena of contemporary art with the conflicting need to create works that asserted some kind of Chinese identity and connectedness to native visual languages."<sup>18</sup>

Laurence Chi Sing Tam (Tan Zhicheng) (1933–2013), a prominent ink painter, educator, and art administrator in postwar Hong Kong, recalled in the mid-1960s being frustrated that not a single book on Chinese painting provided "a guide, not even a hint, on how to teach students the basic brush technique without going through the process of copying and imitating the works of the teacher or of other masters."<sup>19</sup> He credited Lui Shou-kwan, whose lecture he attended one evening in 1966 at the Extra-mural Department at CUHK, for lighting his way. Tam and several of Lui's followers founded the In Tao Art Association in 1968 and the One Art Group in 1971 that became the backbone of the New Ink Movement. In designing his art curriculum at the Wah Yan College in Kowloon (a Roman Catholic secondary school for boys), Tam got rid of copying and encouraged students to do free sketches, explore the different speeds and tones of the ink-brush medium, and experiment with geometric as well as design-inspired patterns.<sup>20</sup> Lui Shou-kwan was less critical of copying, especially from classical paintings which he found pedagogically valuable, but his ultimate goal was to create something that reflected contemporary experiences instead of conforming to past rules. Toward the end of his life, Lui's paintings grew more philosophical, as epitomized by his *Chan* (Zen) series.

### Hong Kong as a Haven for Ink Painting

Ceded to Britain as a colony in 1841 by the Treaty of Nanjing that concluded the First Opium War, Hong Kong has evolved through more than a century into a cosmopolitan city of capitalist trade. After the Second World War, the rich and the poor, from such places as the formerly industrialized city of Shanghai, flocked to Hong Kong in search of jobs and business opportunities. Artists, collectors, filmmakers, and other creative types from the mainland and Southeast Asia helped to foster interests in art and culture. Notable among these newcomers were the artists Jao Tsung-I (Rao Zongyi), Zhao Shao'ang, and Ding Yanyong. They joined the prewar immigrants such as Pan Dawei in helping to produce and preserve a vibrant Sinitic art culture in Hong Kong.<sup>21</sup> Another important figure who settled in the British colony was the

Guangdong-born, Singapore-and-Shanghai-educated Low Chuck Tiew (Liu Zuochou), who amassed a large collection of Ming and Qing artworks, now constituting the core of Hong Kong Museum of Art's permanent collection of Chinese painting and calligraphy.<sup>22</sup>

Besides attracting migrants from the Sinophone world, Hong Kong was the first to articulate *shuimohua* as an expression of local identity that was neither completely Western nor Chinese. While prewar settlers identified only the *shuimo* medium (which can be traced back to at least the Tang dynasty, 618–907) with *guohua* (national painting), where “national” meant “from China” or from the deep Chinese past, after 1949, and especially following the crackdown of the pro-Communist riots of 1967, the British colonial government took steps to encourage the sense of local belonging among Hong Kongers. Organizations flying the “*guohua*” banner such as the Hong Kong Branch of the Research Society of Chinese (National) Painting (Guohua yanjiu hui) founded by Pan Dawei, Huang Boye, and friends in the 1930s, had receded into the background. The term “national painting” did not completely disappear in Hong Kong, but became by the early 1970s a synonym for conservatism or, at best, a refined aesthetic belonging to by-gone times. Pro-Communist groups in Hong Kong which pledged allegiance to the PRC, notably Renjian Huahui (Painting Society of the Human World, 1946–50), followed the mainland’s lead in pursuing proletarian themes and looked upon *guohua* as anything but progressive.<sup>23</sup> At the “Contemporary Hong Kong Art Exhibitions” of 1969 and 1972, new-style ink paintings surged to the forefront, stealing the spotlight from Western-style oil paintings which had enjoyed some success due to the colonial environment.<sup>24</sup>

In a 1972 speech given at an exhibition of the In Tao Art Association at the City Hall, Lui Shou-kwan touted *shuimohua* as a Hong Kong native painting type with a great future, as both Western-style painting and *guohua* seemed to him to have lost their vitality or fallen into formulaic repetitions (especially the Lingnan School, the most influential *guohua* movement in postwar Hong Kong). According to Lui, *shuimohua* faced no pressure to adhere to any way of doing things, and because:

...those of the older generation of Chinese artists in Hong Kong were feeling distant from Chinese tradition, [and] woke up to this realization after having had the chance to reflect on the situation. Moreover, the younger generation have absorbed concepts of modern art and were leaping to new attempts at expressing these ideas in *shuimo*.<sup>25</sup>

This was the situation Liu Kuo-sung found himself in when he moved to Hong Kong.

Raymond Man-leung Tang (Deng Minliang) (who graduated from CUHK in 1992) remembers fondly Liu’s “Modern Ink Painting” (*xiandai shuimo*) course. According to Tang, Liu held nothing back when demonstrating his technical inventions and encouraged students to experiment individually and sometimes in groups. It was an energizing environment with a heavy focus on critiques and discussions. Besides playing with ink, students learned to incorporate collage, imprinting, and other “*fei bimoxing*” (non-ink-brushy) methods into their pictures. When a new avenue was discovered, Liu “would often be more excited” than the students.<sup>26</sup>

Liu Kuo-sung’s two decades in Hong Kong saw several technical innovations that became his signature. It was there that he developed “water-rubbing” (*shuituo*), the creation of a marbling effect by stirring ink into a pool of water and soaking up the patterns with paper. The swirling, curvilinear passages can then be worked

on—with ink strokes and/or collage—to form landscapes with patterns he called *jili*, alternatives to the traditional texture strokes (*cunfa*). It is said he perfected water-rubbing in his bathtub in Hong Kong with students watching.<sup>27</sup> Another technique that he discovered in the 1980s was “ink staining” or *zimo*, which entails transferring ink from one sheet of paper to another with spot-wetting to control the contact points.<sup>28</sup>

As a pedagogical experiment to reverse the tradition of teaching “skills first, difference (self-distinction) second,” Liu challenged students to come up with striking compositions right from the start, without having first undergone the whole sequence of foundational training (which he regarded as too passive and technique-centric). Liu was skeptical of the long-held belief that traditional methods—whether Western-style drawing or Chinese-style copying of old masters’ brushwork—were essential to making compelling art.<sup>29</sup> This was a conclusion similar to that which Lui Shou-kwan and his followers in the New Ink Movement also reached. Both Lui and Liu had a strong following in Hong Kong. However, while Lui Shou-kwan’s fame drew considerable strength from British and bilingually educated supporters, Liu Kuo-sung discovered a burgeoning excitement for his ideas in the PRC.

In 1981, Jiang Feng, Head of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, invited Liu Kuo-sung to represent Taiwan and Hong Kong to celebrate the founding of the Research Institute of Traditional Chinese Painting (Zhongguohua yanjiu yuan) in Beijing. For an artist with a Taiwanese past to make such a semi-diplomatic visit to China at the time was a political risk, one that Liu did only under the conditions of “no photos, no newspaper reports, no interviews.” In the Chinese media, he was vaguely referred to as one “Taiwanese painter.”<sup>30</sup> But after meeting leading local ink painters such as Cheng Shifa, Wu Guanzhong, and Li Keran, he yearned to reconnect with the mainland and help drive change. In 1983, Liu agreed to a solo exhibition at the National Art Museum and embarked on a historic tour of eighteen cities. Mainlanders saw slides of his plucked-fiber paintings, among other works that represented a refreshing break with the Cultural Revolution and Socialist Realism.

### Liu’s Distinguished Followers in Hong Kong

In postwar Hong Kong, a university education was not available to most secondary school graduates. But starting in 1973, non-degree students of a two-year certificate program in the Department of Extramural Studies were allowed to take classes with Liu Kuo-sung.<sup>31</sup> Several of the students showed their work in 1975 and 1976 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and called the event the “Exhibition of Modern Ink Painting” (*Xiandai shuimohua zhan*). Liu Kuo-sung’s Modern Ink Painting Movement (*Xiandai shuimohua yundong*) was largely an extension of his work at CUHK. In 1977, the Modern Chinese Ink Painting Association (today’s Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society) was formed by a core group of Liu’s students from both the degree and certificate programs.<sup>32</sup> Since then, works by this group, whose membership has changed over time, have appeared in countless local and overseas exhibitions. In 1985, some of the members joined the International League of Modern Ink Painting (Guoji shuimohua lianmeng), and participated in the organization’s exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, which later traveled to mainland China.

Three years later, the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society joined forces with the Taichung Municipal Cultural Center to stage



FIG. 3 Anita Lau, *Mountain Moon Reverie*, 2013  
Ink and color on paper, 24.02 × 24.02 in (61 × 61 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

a Taiwan-Hong Kong Exchange Exhibition. Then in 1990, Liu led members of this group to Nanjing for another exhibition to promote ink painting exchanges.<sup>33</sup> Some of the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Association members from the 1980s who remain active today are Anita Lau Kam Chee (Liu Jinzhi), Eddy Chan Kwan-Lap (Chen Junli), Lee Chun-yi (Li Junyi), and Chan Shing Kau (Chen Chengqiu).

Both Anita Lau and Eddy Chan received their extra-mural certificates around 1980. Lau's unpredictable and mesmerizing arabesques using the water-rubbing technique replace the texture strokes of traditional landscape painting.<sup>34</sup> She refined the basic principle taught by Liu Kuo-sung by creating her own device for dropping and lifting the paper. In a painting titled *Mountain Moon Reverie* (2013), she pays tribute to her teacher by adding a prominent pink sphere that conjures Liu's "Space" Series (Fig. 3). For a feminine touch, she distributes her stenciled "scattered flowers patterns" or *sanhua* here and there on the picture.

Eddy Chan Kwan-Lap is an accomplished "Liu School" painter in Hong Kong. During his thirties, he completed the Modern Ink Painting certificate program at CUHK and went on to enroll in the art department of Concordia University in Montreal from 1982 to 1985.<sup>35</sup> Winters are long and intense in this Canadian city. Chan always found comfort in the trees that stood valiantly in the thick snow as if there was, in his own words, "blood as hot as fire flowing into the trunks."<sup>36</sup> After returning to Hong Kong, he started to paint trees to symbolize triumph over adversity (Fig. 4). In 1988, Chan Kwan-Lap's Life No. 7 won the Creativity Prize at the Exhibition of Contemporary Ink and Color of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, which now owns the work. He outlines six steps for producing this complex, almost surreal, image:

1. On a piece of *xuan* paper, impress ink marks at various places in some sort of pattern while avoiding areas that will be left white. He calls this first sheet the "draft" or *huagao*.



FIG. 4 Eddy Chan, *Life, No. 29*, 1988  
Ink and color on paper, 26.77 × 54.33 in (68 × 138 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

2. Once the ink is completely dry, place it over another sheet that has a rough texture created by creasing and folding (Fig. 5).
3. Rub a white candle here and there over the *huagao*. The bumpy areas created by the uneven surface below will get waxed and form a resist.
4. Use a spray gun to delineate tree trunks and roots on the *huagao*. The ink but not the wax will be absorbed by the paper.
5. Carefully scrape off the wax with a small coin to reveal white veining.
6. Clarify the motifs and their relationships by painting in the details.<sup>37</sup>

Chan calls this invention "wax-rubbing" (*latuofa*). In 1992, Chan moved to Canada where he lived for the next four years. In 1996 he permanently resettled in Hong Kong. Another of Eddy Chan's



FIG. 5 Sample of a folded paper used by Eddy Chan for his wax-rubbing works.  
Image courtesy of the artist

favorite techniques for painting snow landscapes is the “ink staining” developed by Liu Kuo-sung. The recurrence of meandering white patterns and glacial blue passages in Chan’s oeuvre bear the unmistakable marks of Liu Kuo-sung and of Chan’s Canadian experience (Fig. 6).<sup>38</sup>

Of Liu Kuo-sung’s disciples, the best known internationally is Lee Chun-yi (b. 1965), who was born in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, but received most of his education in Hong Kong. He entered CUHK as a biochemistry major, but with Liu’s encouragement switched to fine arts and graduated with first-class honors in 1988. He developed an original technique of cork painting reminiscent of ancient stele rubbings, with squares imprinted on a dense grid. The porosity and standalone nature of each stamp allow for great textural and tonal nuances.<sup>39</sup> A memorable early work by Lee is

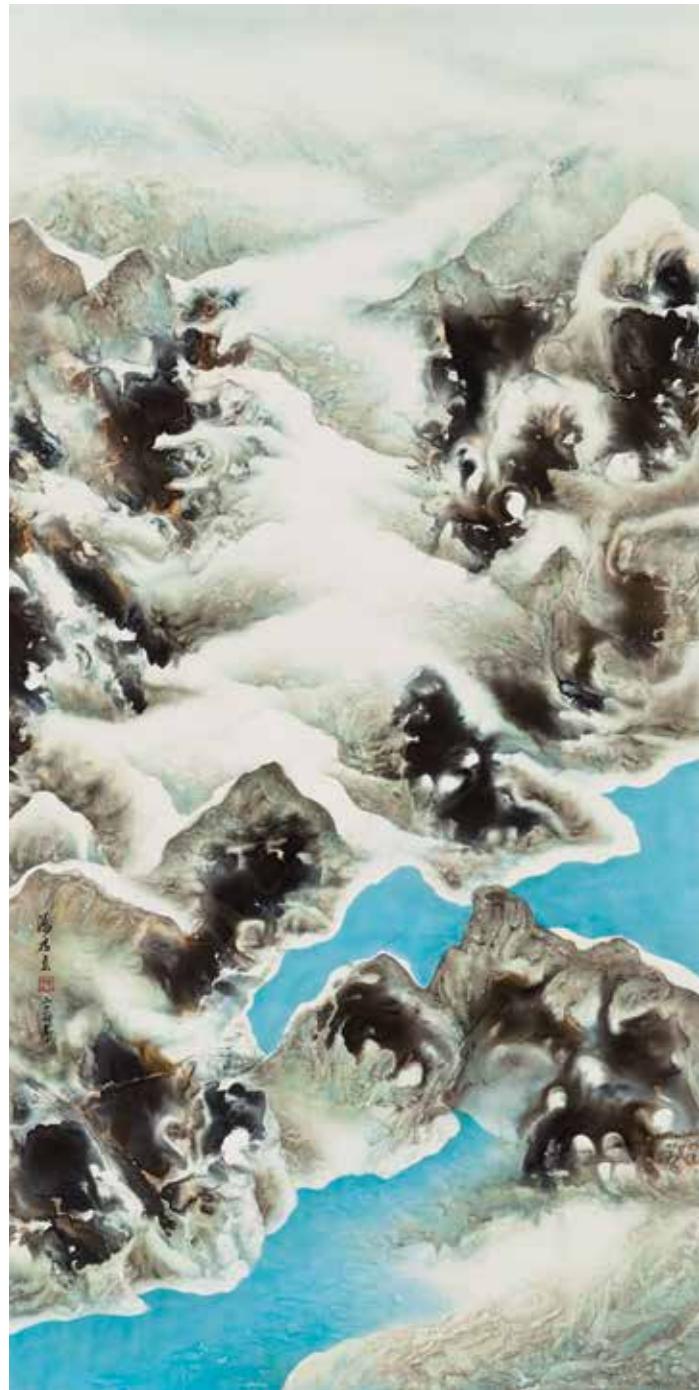


FIG. 6 Eddy Chan, *Spiritual Voice of Mountain Lake, No. 2, 2014*  
Ink and color on paper, 54.33 × 27.17 in (138 × 69 cm). Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist

*Sacrifice in Four Seasons* (1994), a cruciform composition that explores the tension between opposites: figure and landscape, manmade and natural, constancy and change (Fig. 7). The shuffling of formal binaries—monochrome/colored, upright/inverted, panorama/close-up, tranquil/turbulent—highlights Lee’s conception of art as an all-encompassing universe. Lee’s grids are filled with characters (such as the *Heart Sutra* and Mao Zedong’s name) that form landscapes, figures, and flowers. Having lived through the sovereignty transfer in late-twentieth-century Hong Kong, he is a keen observer of the changing political dynamics of the “three coasts two places.” With his unique technique, which he describes as “rational,” he probes the unsettling question of fragmented identities with titles such as *Shanshui, Shansui* 山水山碎 (Mountain-Water, Broken Mountain) (Fig. 8).<sup>40</sup>

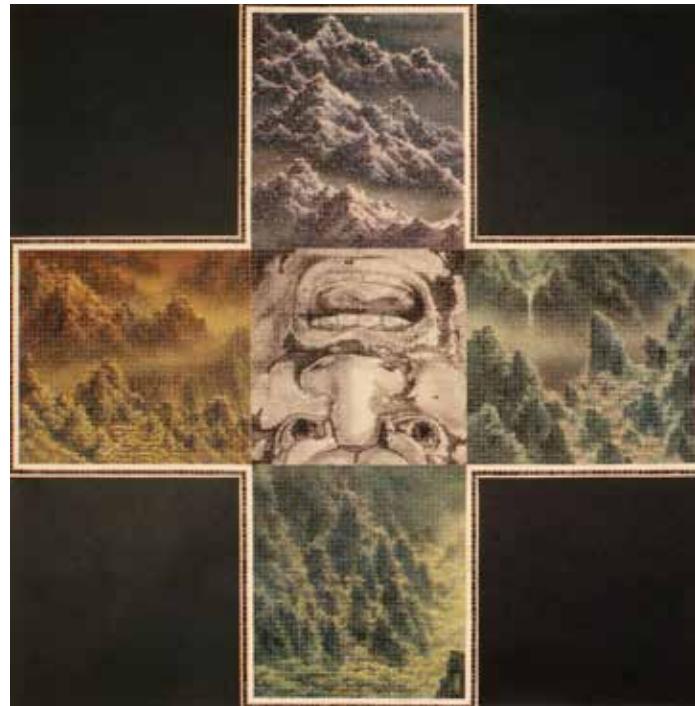


FIG. 7 Lee Chun-yi, *Sacrifice in Four Seasons*, 1994  
Ink on paper, 53.54 × 53.54 in (136 × 136 cm). Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist

Lee returned to the classroom to complete a master’s degree in 1997 at Taichung’s Tunghai University, where Liu Kuo-sung had accepted a position after retiring from The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1992. Lee then earned a Ph.D. in Chinese art history from Arizona State University in 2009. As a scholar and an artist, he is one of the chief spokespeople for the Liu School today. Lee now teaches at the NTNU in Taipei.

In tracing the legacy of Liu Kuo-sung through his students’ activities, it is clear that his heart never left Taiwan. While using Hong Kong as a test bed for new ideas of ink painting from the 1970s to the 1990s, he sought to reconnect with Taiwan and make an impact there. Two notable events that came about in this context were the 1991 “Exhibition of Modern Hong Kong Ink Painting” held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the 1994 “Grand Exhibition of Modern Chinese Ink Painting” at the Taiwan Provincial Fine Arts Museum in Taichung (now the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts). Two-thirds of the invited artists at the latter event were members of the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Association. These occasions acquainted Taiwanese painters with the Liu School revolution in Hong Kong and brought the two art worlds

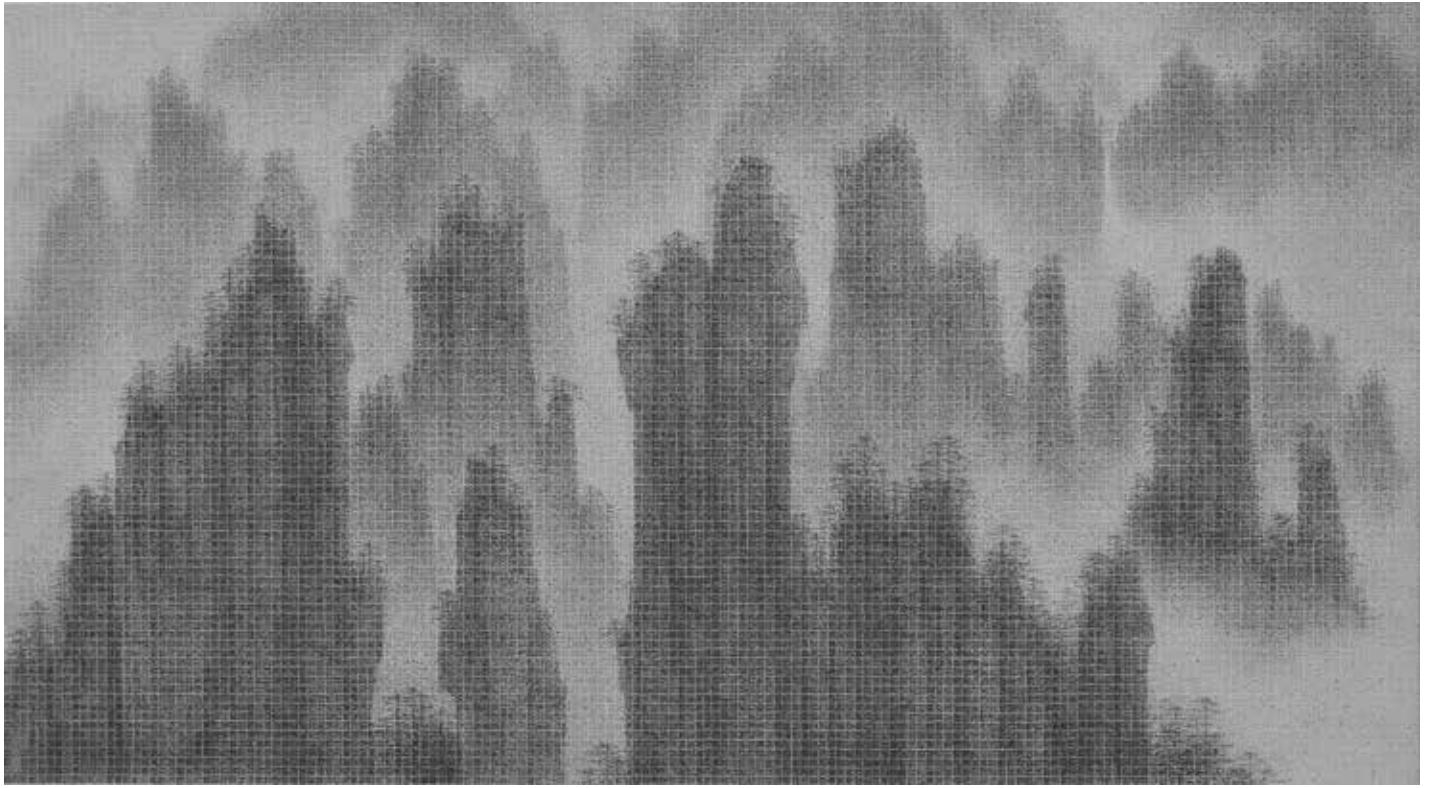


FIG. 8 Lee Chun-yi, *Shanshui, Shanshui*, 2013

Ink and color on paper, 33.86 x 62.60 in (86 x 159 cm)  
Private collection. Image courtesy of the artist

closer together. Following his position at Taichung's Tunghai University from 1992 to 1996, Liu was appointed Head of the Fine Arts Research Institute at the Tainan National University of the Arts before retiring from academia in 1999. He continued to teach classes in Taiwan (notably a non-degree course at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall) until December 2017, building an orbit of followers as he had in Hong Kong.

### Conclusion

Hong Kong has the reputation of being a cultural desert, and postcolonial studies often point to its lack of a precolonial culture as a deficit. However, when Liu Kuo-sung arrived there, this laissez-faire city was in an economic boom and undergoing critical transformations in which his modernism could thrive. The territory's cosmopolitanism fostered the coexistence of Sinophone culture makers. From the 1970s to the 1990s, inventiveness thrived through free explorations that did not necessarily signal a fixed temporality and ideological position. Hong Kong's immigrant (refugee) culture and colonial liminality turned out to be the perfect setting for artistic pluralism.

The term "*shuimo*" is widely used today by ink artists across the Sinophone world, so it is easy to forget that the concept had close ties with the rise of Hong Kong's native identity in the late colonial period. Eva Kit Wah Man uses the term "disidentification" rather than "resistance" to explain Hong Kong's attitude toward both mainland China and the British colonial government.<sup>41</sup> Unlike many colonial regimes, Britain cultivated the image of an

"enlightened" ruler which encouraged rather than suppressed local Hong Kong identity in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Since Hong Kong's sovereignty transfer to China, local identity has been a recurrent flashpoint, but the validity of Chinese linguistic and aesthetic traditions in the new Special Administrative Region is never questioned.

Today, Hong Kong is seeking a leadership role in contemporary ink by hosting "Ink Asia," the annual art fair established in 2015. The contemporary enthusiasm for the ink medium has a great deal to do with China's rise as a global superpower. Yet it is also productive to see ink art in the broader Asian context that includes postwar trends in Japan and Korea, as well as the Sinophone and diasporic communities, as the recent exhibition titled "The Weight of Lightness" at Hong Kong's M+ Museum sought to do.<sup>43</sup> Few versed in contemporary art today think ink art is too old-fashioned, and even painters who primarily produce two-dimensional paintings are enjoying greater commercial and critical attention than just a decade ago. If market prices are any gauge, Liu Kuo-sung with his brand of formalism is at the top of the Chinese and Sinophone art world, even in the age of rising social engagements. Liu Kuo-sung did not single-handedly "father" modern ink painting, but it would be hard to imagine a history of postwar ink reforms without him. He will also be remembered as one of the key champions of this art form in the early twenty-first century.

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## Notes

- 1 See Chen Lusheng, *Liu Guosong pingzhuan* [Critical Biography of Liu Guosong] (Nanling: Guangxi Meishu Chubanshe, 1996). All translations in this article are the author's unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 The translation of *shuimo* as "ink art" is best represented by the exhibition organized by Maxwell Hearn at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 2013–14. See Maxwell K. Hearn, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, distributed by Yale University Press, 2013).
- 3 Zhang Yu, *Zhongjie shuimohua! Cong "shuimohua" dao "shuimo"* [The Termination of Chinese Ink Painting: From "Ink Painting" to "Ink"], exhibition catalog (Taichung: Da Xiang Art Space, 2010), 15–16.
- 4 Hong Kong Museum of Art of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, *Chengchuan yu chuangzao: shuimo dui shuimo* [Legacy and Creations—Ink Art vs Ink Art], exhibition catalog, Shanghai Art Museum (Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government, 2010). The quotation comes from one of the artists and preface writers, Wucius Wong (in his role as Expert Advisor, Lecture and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong SAR Government), writing about "the Transcending Boundaries of Ink," 19.
- 5 Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); see also Shu-mei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards (eds), *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 6 For an account of the context between the two strands of national-style painting and Liu Kuo-song's role in it, see Jason C. Kuo, *Art and Cultural Politics in Postwar Taiwan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), chap. 3.
- 7 For a succinct, recent account of the Fifth Moon Group, see An-yi Pan, "The Fifth Moon Group: Pioneers of New Chinese Modern Art in Taiwan," *Orientations* 49, no. 1 (January/February 2018): 77–82. [Also see An-yi Pan's 2021 essay in this Reader, "Liu Kuo-sung and the Art and Literary Environment of 1950s and 1960s Taiwan," pp. 34–44.]
- 8 Hsiao Chong-ray (Xiao Qiongrui), *Shuimo juling: Liu Guosong zhuan* [Giant Spirit of Water-and-Ink: Biography of Liu Kuo-sung] (New Taipei City: Qingguang Wenhua Chuban Youxian Gongsi, 2011), 47.
- 9 See Chen Man-hua, "Xinchao zhi yong: Meixinchu (USIS) Meiguo yishu zhanlan yu Taiwan xiandai yishu (1950–1960 niandai)" [New Trends: The American Exhibitions Held by USIS and Taiwanese Modern Art (1950s–1960s)], *Taiwan meishu* [Journal of National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts] 109 (July 2017): 27–48.
- 10 Liu Kuo-sung, *Zhongguo xiandaihua zhi lu* [Pathways of Chinese Modern Painting], in *Zhongguo huihua mingjia gean yanjiu*, Liu Guosong [Studies of Cases of Famous Masters of Chinese Painting], ed. Mei Mosheng, vol. 1 (1965; excerpt reprint, Hong Kong and Qingdao: Dajia Liangyou Shuju, 2013), 48–9.
- 11 Hsiao, *Shuimo juling*, 148.
- 12 Ibid., 130.
- 13 On the discussions surrounding the abolishment and reinvention of *guohua* from the 1960s to the 1990s and the turn to *shuimohua* in Taiwan, see Pai Shih-ming (Bai Shiming), "Feichu 'guohua' zhihou—zhanhou Taiwan shuimohua 'Dongya wenhua gongtongti'" [After the Abolishment of the "Chinese painting"—The Formation of the "East Asian Cultural Community" in Ink Paintings in the Postwar Period], *Taiwan meishu* [Journal of National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts] 104 (April 2016): 56–69.
- 14 Hsiao, *Shuimo juling*, 91.
- 15 Ibid., 92.
- 16 Ibid., 126.
- 17 For more on Lui Shou-kwan, see Josh Yiu (ed.), *Two Masters, Two Generations, and One Vision for Modern Chinese Painting: Paintings by Gao Jianfu (1879–1951) and Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975) in the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Oxford* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013).
- 18 David Clarke, "Abstraction and Modern Chinese Art," in *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 138.
- 19 Tam was referring to books such as the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* of the Qing dynasty, Hu Peiheng's *How to Paint Landscape* (1956), Feng Yan's *How to Do Chinese Painting* (1956), Kang Shiyo's *Basic Chinese Painting Techniques* (1959), and Fang Zengxian's *How to Do Chinese Figure Painting* (1965). See Laurence Chi Sing Tam, "Tracing the Origin of a New Program for Learning & Teaching Chinese Ink Painting," in *The Cradle of New Chinese Ink Painting Movement* (Hong Kong: Wah Yan College, 2009), 23.
- 20 See Tam, *Cradle of New Chinese Ink Painting Movement*.
- 21 On Hong Kong calligraphy and its Chinese roots, see The Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, *Xiangjiang xianxian moji* [Chinese Handwriting in Hong Kong: Gleanings of a Hundred Years] (Hong Kong: Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2006).
- 22 For a comprehensive account of Low's collection, see Hui Lai Ping, *Mingjia han mo* [Han Mo: A Magazine of Chinese Brush Art] 32 (September 1, 1992).
- 23 For a succinct survey of the roles played by Renhua Huahui, Luis Chan, and Lui Shou-kwan in the Hong Kong art world, see Eva Kit Wah Man, "Xianggang huihua meixue yu wenhua shenfen de fansi (1940–1980)" [The Aesthetic of Hong Kong Painting and Reflections on Cultural Identity], in *Sixing jiaohuidian—zhexue zai Xianggang* [The Convergence of Thoughts and Actions—Philosophy in Hong Kong], ed. Sze Wai Man (Wen Sihui) and Mei Yee Leung (Liang Meiyi) (Hong Kong: Qingwen Shuwu, 1997), 205–37. Man's article is also available online: <https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/tc/curriculum-development/kla/arts-edu/resources/va-pdp-materials/cdio20061173a.pdf> [accessed Nov. 30, 2021]
- 24 See Lui Shou-kwan, "Dangdai Xianggang Yishuzhan—shuimohua guangmang wanhang jianliqi jinri yishu" [Contemporary Hong Kong Art Exhibition—Ink Painting Shaping Today's Art], *Huaqiao ribao* [Overseas Chinese Daily News] (December 14, 1969).
- 25 Man, "Xianggang huihua meixue yu wenhua shenfen de fansi," with quotes from the lecture notes recorded by Lui's students (1972), sources unknown. See p. 12 of the online version.
- 26 Raymond Man-leung Tang (Deng Minliang), "Liu Guosong laoshi yu women jiushier jie" [Teacher Liu Guosong and Us, the Class of '92], in *Shidao chucheng: cong Xinya zhi ZhongDa de chuanyzhe* [Transmission of the Teachers' Way: Transmitters of Artistry, from New Asia to Chinese University], ed. Xu Zhiyu (Hong Kong: The Alumni Association of the Fine Arts Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2012), 120–1.
- 27 The bathtub reference comes from Chan Shing Kau's recollection, see "Chan Shing Kau laoshi shoucang Xianggang xiandai shuimo youxian dianshi shuimo chuanqi siji" [Master Chan Shing Kao's Collection of Hong Kong Modern Water-and-Ink, Cable Television: Legend of Water-and-Ink, Episode Four], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLgMw1RgxUs> (accessed May 24, 2014).
- 28 See Zhu Hongzi, "Liu Guosong yu 20 shiji shuimo gexin zhi lu" [Lu Guosong and the Path to Reforming Ink Painting in the Twentieth Century], in "Bimo geming: guisu huanzhan zaichu ximao": *guoji shuimo xueshu luntan lunwenji* ["Revolution against the Brush and Ink: the Return to the Primordial and the Emergence of New Possibilities": Proposal for the International Conference on Ink Art], ed. Lee Cheng-ming (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 2015), 225.
- 29 This is a story Liu Guosong often repeats.
- 30 Hsiao, *Shuimo juling*, 164–7.
- 31 On the early history of the Department of Fine Arts at CUHK, see Xianggang Zhongwen Daxue Yishuxi Ershiwu Zhounian Xiqing Tekan Bianji Weiyuanhui [Committee for the Special Volume Commemorating the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong], *Xianggang Zhongwen Daxue yishuxi ershiwu zhounian xiqing tekran* [Special Volume Commemorating the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Department of Fine Arts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong] (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1982).
- 32 The name of this organization was changed to "Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society" in 1989, and then changed again in 2008 to "Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society Company Limited." Publicly, the organization is still known as the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Society.
- 33 See the group's website, <https://www.sites.google.com/site/hkmips/home> (accessed May 19, 2014).
- 34 For a demonstration of her technique, see "Xianggang Xiandai Shuimo Huahui shuimo jifa shuituofa Lau Kam Chee laoshi shifan" [Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Association, Water-and-Ink Technique: Water Rubbing Technique Demonstrated by Master Lau Kam Chee], <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdYxrWNIEBw> (accessed May 24, 2014).
- 35 Eddy Chan Kwan-Lap, "Self-Introduction," *Chinese Ink Painting by Eddy Chan Kwan-Lap: Origin of Life, 1986–1990* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Modern Chinese Art Painting Association, 1990), 7.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Eddy Chan Kwan-lap, email message to author, May 24, 2014.
- 38 Eddy Chan Kwan-lap's "Artist's Statement," in *Hong Kong Art: Visual Archive*, [http://finearts.hku.hk/hcaa/revamp2011/artist\\_view.php?artist\\_id.003](http://finearts.hku.hk/hcaa/revamp2011/artist_view.php?artist_id.003) (accessed May 24, 2014).
- 39 Li Chu-tsing, "Syncretism: Lee Chun-yi's Artistic Novelty," in Lee Chun-yi, *Lee Chunyi* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Modern Chinese Ink Painting Association, 1997), n.p.
- 40 Lee Chun-yi, *Hou zhimin de yishu tansuo: Li Junyi de xiandai shuimohua chuangzuo* [Lee Chun-yi: An Artistic Exploration of Postcolonialism: The Creative Concept of Lee Chun-yi's Modern Ink Painting] (Taipei: Yuanliu Chuban Shiya Youxian Gongsi, 2015).
- 41 See Man, "Xianggang huihua meixue yu wenhua shenren de fansi."
- 42 See Kwong Kin-ming (Kuang Jianming), *Gangying shidai: Yingguo zhimin guanli shu* [The Era of British Colonialism] (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing, 2015).
- 43 M+ is a new museum in the West Kowloon district of Hong Kong. The exhibition "The Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+" took place between October 13, 2017 and January 14, 2018. See the exhibition's website, <https://www.westkowloon.hk/en/inkart> (accessed May 21, 2018).

*Mountain beyond Mountains*, 1968

Ink and color on paper,  
39.09 x 37.20 in (99.3 x 94.5 cm)  
National Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung



Hugh Moss

## THE FOUR SEASONS HANDSCROLL

1985

*The Four Seasons* handscroll is one of the most ambitious works ever produced by Liu Kuo-sung (no stranger to ambitious works) and must rank as one of the largest handscrolls in Chinese art. It owes its conception to a series of events which predated its production by many years.

In the late 1960s the American collector Avery Brundage had acquired a large work by Liu Kuo-sung entitled *The Images of Fleeting Time* to add to his collection at the De Young Museum in San Francisco. Although this was of handscroll format, its concentration on broad sweeps of abstract form and lack of intimate detail suggests that it was originally conceived as a mural to be viewed as a single image. It was published in 1969 as a foldout in [the exhibition catalogue] *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist*, by Chu-tsing Li.

I had, at that time, no particular interest in Chinese painting but had been impressed by the work and intrigued by Brundage's acquisition of it, it being outside of his normal field of interest. A few years later, still with no driving interest in Chinese painting, I made my gallery in London available for a series of exhibitions of works by leading contemporary Chinese artists, including Fang Zhaoling, Lui Shou-kwan [Lü Shoukun] and Liu Kuo-sung. At the time an entire exhibition could be purchased for the price of one decent piece of Qing imperial porcelain and I bought several of Liu's works. They hung on my walls, however, for many years before I became seriously interested in exploring what it was about them that intrigued me. Uninitiated, as I then was, in the deeper meaning of Chinese painting, owning them, and from time to time delving into Chu-tsing Li's book, kept *The Image of Fleeting Time* in my mind.

After the London exhibitions I was out of touch with Liu for several years. He moved from Taiwan and his influential "Fifth Moon Group" to take up a post at the Fine Art Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and I was increasingly busy in London. In 1975, however, events led me to Hong Kong, where I have lived ever since. Although we met occasionally, it was not until about 1980 that I began to develop a serious interest in Chinese paintings. As I became involved, I came to realize how exciting contemporary developments in the field were, both for world art and Chinese art. I began to collect seriously and became totally entranced—drawn into art at levels which not only eluded me over more than two decades of handling many areas of Oriental Art, as student, collector and dealer, but which I had never imagined existed.

Never capable of separating the various facets of the art world, it was not long before I was handling as agent the works of those artists I found the most exciting and with whom I could strike a suitable rapport for such an enterprise, including Liu Kuo-sung.

The Brundage painting was still on my mind so I asked Liu if he would do another for me. Not a copy, for as with any serious

artist his creativity would preclude exact repetition, but a long handscroll with *The Images of Fleeting Time* as the departure point. He agreed to do so, but we both understood that such an undertaking must await the right moment and take its own time. (Liu as a teacher, academic, and writer who works at home when he paints, must frequently struggle against other concerns to find the time and suitable ambience for major works.)

A year or two passed during which I mentioned the work from time to time, but did not press Liu to start it, respecting the endeavor as one which could not be forced, only inspired. In 1983 I was approached to present an exhibition of my collection at the Hong Kong Arts Centre as part of the Symposium on Twentieth Century Chinese Painting. The exhibition was to fill all five exhibition galleries and be part of an international event destined to focus considerable attention on contemporary Chinese painting. Liu was as excited as I was by this prospect, and decided to begin the handscroll in an effort to complete it in time for the exhibition.

Too large for any other room in the house, *The Four Seasons* was undertaken in the long living room of his University residence. (Liu lives in a spot many artists would consider ideal. It is a spacious apartment on the side of a hill overlooking a pattern of islands and mainland hills rising out of a broad inlet of the South China Sea.) Once he had begun, the work took nearly two months to complete. As it progressed it was clear that it would have little in common with its original inspiration. Day after day abstract forms grew into a landscape and the landscape burst into color. It also got longer and longer as Liu added sheet after sheet of paper until the final form was arrived at—the unmounted painting measuring almost two feet by twenty-eight feet.

In an attempt to learn more about the process of art I have tried wherever possible to watch artists at work. With most, this amounts only to demonstration, as they find an audience incompatible with the concentration necessary for serious work. Liu, whether because he is accustomed to students from his long years of teaching, or because his concentration is so complete, seems unconcerned by my presence and I have occasionally taken advantage of this to learn. Having taken up painting when I became seriously interested in Chinese painting, I was drawn into the creative process of this particular work, if only as a spectator, and learned a great deal from it—about painting in general, about this painting and, of course, about the artist.

Liu would spend hour after hour with his special fibrous cotton papers, unlikely assortment of brushes (few of which owe much, if anything, to the traditional calligrapher's brush), and large pots of ink and colors (many of them vivid acrylics) creating his landscape. The process was a constant dialogue with the medium. Having laid out the major abstract forms of the initial composition (later, sheets were added to each end) in broad, confident strokes of ink, applied with a large brush, Liu would sit and stare at a section until

it "came alive" in his imagination. Then with endless patience and often meticulous care he would infuse that "life" onto the surface of the paper.

The bold initial strokes were first enlivened by the removal of coarse surface fibers, leaving ragged white scars running through the black ink—later to become plunging waterfalls and rock-like texturing strokes. (The removal of these surface fibers, on paper specially developed by Liu while in Taiwan, took place over a period of time and at different stages, resulting in a complex pattern of texturing.) Then with total concentration on, and involvement in every area, the resulting surface was worked into three covered banks, sheer crags, tumbling waterfalls; into lowland paddy fields and glacial heights with broad wet washes and the most minutely and carefully applied details of trees and foliage. To the viewer there was an inescapable sense of inevitability about each detail as it came to life; as if the artist was somehow involved in drawing forth from another dimension that which he can see but we cannot—a sense of magic. This is the cornerstone of the artist's importance to mankind over the ages, the ability to manifest in physical form aspects of universal truths which exist far beyond the physical world of the finite, the temporal, and the individual.

To achieve this the artist must have three essential qualities. Vision: the ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, absorb it and re-express it in such a way that we too can see it and, grasping it, expand our experience, our understanding, and therefore our level of consciousness. Technique: sufficient acquired technical ability to express that vision without it being unduly diluted by the difficulties of the chosen medium; and integrity in how both vision and technique are used. Out of these arise two other essential qualities: confidence and a total commitment to every single work produced. This last is an essential feature of every masterpiece in any artistic medium: that at the time of production the artist must "live" his work of art. It becomes the single most important thing in his life and therefore during the time of its genesis, from conception to completion, it must consume his entire attention. The artist who, for a moment, lets this total concentration slip, and allows some aspect of the work to become wearisome detail; or perhaps allows repetitive strokes of a particular area to lose their vital rhythm, their importance as individual strokes, diminishes his work of art in direct proportion.

As I watched Liu work, at one time for four hours at a stretch, I became aware of the importance of this total concentration. Every branch of every tree that clung to a precipitous slope, regardless of how impressionistically rendered, had to grow in his mind first in an extraordinary act of concentration, and was then transferred to the paper—the time spent actually applying brush to paper being far exceeded by the time it took to determine its course. Often a period of intense concentration would be followed simply by the merest touch of the brush across a tiny area of the surface, but once applied there seemed no doubt that the brief gesture was precisely what was needed, that none other would have served.

The four-hour experience was quite indescribable. A meditative experience in which for myself, and surely for the artist, there seemed for long periods of time to be no mundane world, only this wondrous landscape. Becoming involved in the creative process in this way gave me a degree of insight into that total, meditative concentration that the artist enjoys in the act of creation, and which is essential to the process of art.

The Chinese have thought of art as "play" for so many centuries, as a meditative release from the mundane world—a profound sort

of "play" well beyond our normal concept of the meaning of the word. As such it becomes the more profound as communication. All art is ultimately a means of sharing experience so that we may expand our individual and collective consciousness towards a point of perfect understanding, which seems to be mankind's eternal quest. The arts with their infinitely elastic language of communication have the ability to lead us from the known into the unknown, to constantly change our point of view, and take us beyond the finite into the infinite, for we cannot grasp infinite, universal truth in a finite realm of reality. It is the source of their authority in all civilizations known to man—indeed civilization without art, without that impulse to turn a functional shelter into something pleasing to the eye, to turn gesture into dance and pictorial art, sound into music, is unthinkable.

The handscroll format is one uniquely developed by the Chinese as an intimate response to a sophisticated understanding of the nature of art and its role in society. As part of their philosophical abstraction of subject matter, the Chinese artist has traditionally painted the experience of his subject rather than its physical reality—his response to the subject actually becomes the main subject. This led to a rejection of the necessity for single-viewpoint depiction more than a thousand years ago. If the artist understood the nature of a subject in all its physical aspects and was able to grasp also its inner nature, it was quite inappropriate to depict it only from one physical point of view. (A concept which in the modern Western revolution in art led to Cubism.) This allowed for exaggeratedly attenuated formats such as the handscroll, where the element of time is added to that of space in the process of taking artist and viewer beyond both.

Since Chinese paintings have traditionally been rolled up for storage and brought out for enjoyment this also added great intimacy to the handscroll format. It is brought out only when the viewer is prepared to become wholly involved in it. Indeed it is extremely difficult to glance off the surface of a handscroll the way one is able to with a hanging work, as one becomes involved with the painting at the point of making preparations for viewing, and the experience is further enhanced by being in control of the speed of progress through the work.

The normal approach to a handscroll is to set aside some time, find a comfortable, peaceful spot with a flat surface, and perhaps with a little music, a glass of wine and the right ambience, and embark upon a private journey into the magical world of the painting.

It is "read" from right to left, so one first encounters the title panel (in this case written by Li Keran while the painting was in Beijing for exhibition on a tour of China with other works by Liu in 1984/5; and is accompanied by a laudatory inscription—a record of Li's response to the work). Then one progresses into the scroll itself and the landscape. Moving through it is achieved by rolling at the right while unrolling at the left (or vice versa on the return journey) while sliding the whole work in order to keep a comfortably proportioned section in front of the eyes. Rather than a continuous movement this tends to take the form of moving from portion to portion of the landscape and then pausing to enjoy each aspect of the revealed section, like a real journey in the landscape where one moves from point to point and then pauses to enjoy the scenery. At first one tends to become involved in the landscape—the physical setting which is brought to mind—but one is soon captivated by other languages that have the capacity to make subject matter fade to irrelevancy.



One of the ways in which works of art expand our consciousness is by constantly changing our point of view, broadening our vision. We may begin with a single point of view, but art forces us to see things from several points of view (at the simplest of levels by constantly altering our perception of what art is). Eventually, the more deeply we become involved with the arts the more paradoxes we must "think" our way past, the more points of view we must consider. Being able to see things from many different points of view separates the wise man from the bigot and is fundamental to the evolution of consciousness.

As we move through the handscroll we become involved with other languages of art—with form, color, line, texture, and myriad ineffable refinements of these languages which permeate our understanding. Once we become involved at this level the painting takes on a life entirely of its own. We are drawn into an experience which takes us into a dimension beyond the mundane, and therefore one vital to our evolution as conscious beings.

My own journeys through this work have sometimes lasted for several hours. While the experience may be different each time, there is a unifying element: it is meditative. One returns refreshed, able to see life a little differently: enriched by the experience. Sometimes I will become entranced by the abstract form of the work, sometimes by its textures and colors (which form a powerful combination in this particular painting). Sometimes I find myself pausing, often at the same spot, in Autumn, beneath an overhanging cliff,

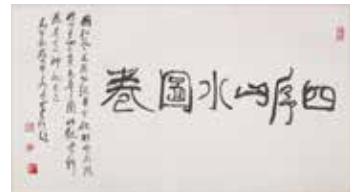
gazing at a distant waterfall, and I drift into thought, but not, somehow, thought emanating from the real world, but from the world of the painting—a new perspective, a different point of view.

I have frequently seen it upside down, as I have introduced friends to the delights of both this work and the handscroll format. It is not diminished by this, simply different. One is more easily involved in the form and texture, line, and color in this way.

It is an important key to understanding Chinese painting to grasp the "syncretic" nature of Chinese thought over the centuries, although the word "syncretic" fails to define its nature adequately as it means the *attempted* reconciliation of opposite tenets or beliefs. The mind governed by languages of reason, epitomized by attempts with dictionaries to pinpoint precise meaning, cannot conceive of the possibility of actually practicing this capacity. We have not, traditionally, been able to grasp that it is possible to be a Christian, Buddhist, and Daoist all at the same time; that black may be white, or both neither. Despite our recent revolution in consciousness, demonstrated nowhere better than in our arts, most of us are not yet ready to go quite so far. The Chinese mind however is well practiced with its Daoist and Chan (Zen) comprehension, reaching far beyond the languages of reason, in finding a level of understanding where none of this is difficult to grasp, let alone impossible.

As this level of comprehension has been available to, and respected by, the Chinese for more than two thousand years,





what equates to our modern revolution in consciousness, and therefore in the arts, took place as a gradual evolution in China. It was manifest in the art of painting by, at latest, the eighth century CE (in calligraphy, even earlier), and was critically understood by the eleventh. That it did not result in expressions on the surface of pictorial art similar to those of the West is largely due to their "syncretic" consciousness. They felt no need to isolate the languages of art in order to explore them fully, or enjoy them. There was no need for a painting to be either figurative or abstract, minimalist or expressionist, impressionist or abstract expressionist. It could be all of these at once.

When the Chinese artist paints, the subject matter is purely a point of departure, which is why the landscape, as a generalized vehicle for expression, has satisfied him for so many centuries. The landscape is not really his subject; his personal response to the mysteries of human life is. Every artist's response is excitingly different, a wholly new revelation of experience; and there is, therefore, no need to keep changing the subject matter. He is, having chosen his subject matter as a point of departure, then involved in an abstract exercise which transcends it. It is not forgotten, it is kept aloft in a "syncretic" juggling act while the artist concentrates on the next language of communication. Then, as each brushstroke is applied, the exercise in abstract form joins subject matter in a pattern in the juggler's mind and each stroke becomes a work of pure Abstract Expressionism, a delight in

Liu Kuo-sung, *The Four Seasons Handscroll*, 1983  
Ink and color (including acrylics) on "Liu Kuo-sung" (cotton fiber) paper  
Signed and dated with two seals of the artist: "Liu Kuo-sung" and  
"Yige Dongxinanbei ren" (A Man of East, West, South, and North)  
28.5 × 338.58 in (56.7 × 846.6 cm)  
The Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection.  
Image courtesy of Hugh Moss

gesture of ink and brush on absorbent paper. Color and texture join the process, the pattern of constantly changing concentration, but by now the master juggler is moving easily and confidently through this swirling mass of visual, intellectual, and emotional communication, drawing us into communion with the painting as a whole, into pure experience which is beyond description and beyond time and place. This pure experience is analogous with the "stilled" mind, the concept of "thoughtless" consciousness in Daoist and Zen experience, the "realm of nothingness" about which the poet, painter, and calligrapher Su Shi (1036–1101) wrote in his old age. It is pure because the described is not altered by the description; its nature is communicated without intervening interpretation.

It is only when we begin to see Chinese paintings in this light, when we can accept the paradox of a purely abstract painting made up wholly of figurative elements, that we can begin to enjoy what so many have called the "mystery" of Chinese painting, and indeed of art in general; for all great art exists, whatever the balance of languages, ultimately in this indefinable state of pure communication.



Liu Zijian

**"I HEAR YOUR VOICE, MY COUNTRY"**  
**A CROSS-SECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF LIU GUOSONG'S**  
**IMPACT ON MODERN CHINESE INK PAINTING**  
1996



FIG 1 Liu Kuo-sung  
*I Hear Your Voice, My Country*, 1979  
Ink and color on paper  
36.61 × 22.83 in (93 × 58 cm)

*I HEAR YOUR VOICE, MY COUNTRY* (Fig. 1) is the name of a painting by Liu Guosong. I have chosen to use it as the title of this article because it reminds me of the way it has resonated with a great many people in mainland China who have been moved by its deep sense of longing. Art has the power to break through the barriers of the differing social systems and ideologies that divide us, and in so doing enables us to hear each other's voices. And once this happens, this kind of listening becomes a mutual need, indeed a requirement, in the effort to maintain the survival and development of Chinese culture on both sides of the Strait. Liu Guosong, who moved to Taiwan in 1948, is the first Taiwanese painter since 1949 to return to the mainland in order to hold an exhibition here. He brought with him news from the other side of the Strait that had been cut off from us, and through him the mainland art world had its first chance to encounter modern Chinese painting as it was developing in Taiwan. Contact has given rise to exchange; and since that time a clear new system of reference was added to modern ink painting's path of development in mainland China. "I hear your Voice": this is a kind of attentive listening through which we must engage with and for each other. It is in just such a process of mutual listening and response that Liu Guosong's influence on modern ink painting in China began, and continues to flourish.

1.

When the Cultural Revolution came to an end in mainland China in 1976, the art academies which had been forced to close during that period reopened their doors and resumed enrollment in 1978. In order to redress the damage to [art education] wrought by the Cultural Revolution, a major effort was initiated to identify candidates from the large artistic talent pool within society and facilitate their acceptance into the art academies. For graduate-level study, candidates had to be former graduates of art academies or have achieved an equivalent level through self-study. The underlying objective was to quickly restore the system of orthodox academicism that the ten years of the Cultural Revolution had disrupted. For intellectuals in any period of history, living through a decade of turmoil like that of the Cultural Revolution would count as an exceptional life experience. Now a large group of creatively talented young and middle-aged people who shared this life experience were suddenly taking on important roles in the halls of the art academy, marking a new era in mainland Chinese art history in which a rebellion against the Cultural Revolution's extreme practice of "art serving ideology" and the advocacy of a continuation of academicism were key elements. Without doubt, academicism was once again becoming the mainstream current in the movement towards artistic innovation. The catalogue *Selected Works of Contemporary Ink Paintings by*

*Chinese Graduate Students* [Zhongguo dangdai yanjiusheng guohua xuan] published in 1985 presents a concentrated expression of the early phase of this emerging mainstream art.

Stylistically speaking, this collection of paintings represents a continuation of the formal language of pre-Cultural Revolution art: simply put, it was the latest iteration of the art of Fang Zengxian (1931–2019), Liu Wenxi (1933–2019), Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), Li Keran (1907–1989), Jiang Zhaohe (1904–1986), and the Lingnan and Chang'an schools. While these student works do not constitute a meaningful improvement over theirs, there was a significant difference in content, marked by qualities of rusticism and contemporary-life realism testifying to a backlash against the officially prescribed modes for creative production. Yet despite the different content, overall they still adhered to the typical model of academic painting. One significant exception, however, is the painter Gu Wenda (b. 1955). His *Age of Totems* (*Tuteng shidai*), in which he clearly appropriates certain Western compositional and symbolic elements, created a distinctive visuality that set Gu apart from the others. At the same time, however, his composition is basically a magnified version of traditional brush-and-ink mark-making, demonstrating that here he is harnessing his experience of tradition rather than an experience of creation. In this use of a kind of hyper-Westernized symbolism, Gu neglected the necessity of constructing a new vocabulary, and as such represents a basic trend in the early stages of the mainland avant-garde art movements to create innovative new approaches to Chinese ink painting.

Liu Guosong's entry into the mainland arts scene was relatively smooth: the movement towards innovation in ink painting was already in its nascent state, paving the way for his invitation from the Chinese Artists Association to exhibit his works. The fact that he was an overseas artist with an already established international reputation was of especial interest to painters in the PRC. From what followed, this was a very successful and skillfully handled initiative, with Liu's exhibition being favorably received by a diverse audience: young and middle-aged viewers saw an unquestionably new kind of art, while elders recognized in his art a profound expression of the spirit of the [ink painting] tradition. Even those viewers accustomed to applying a more ideological perspective recognized the beauty in his works. Mainland audiences were electrified by his painting *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* for it had been a long time since they had seen works exhibiting this kind of direct, passionate sentiment. Having themselves just awakened from a ten-year nightmare, they could not help but be moved by the painting's touching tone of melancholy and its dreamlike imagery.

Liu Guosong subsequently exhibited his works in a number of other cities on the mainland, where the reception he received from the local governments and artist associations was of an equally welcoming nature. Opening ceremonies were attended by luminaries of the painting world, with opening remarks given by senior artists, ribbons cut by deputy directors of the CPPCC, and extensive coverage given in the media featuring similar kinds of articles and reviews. Before his death [in 1983] even Jiang Feng, at the time Chairman of the Chinese Artists Association and known for his loathing of traditional *bimo*, wrote an introduction to Liu's exhibition in which he described Liu's art as "ingeniously innovative, fresh yet timeless, and transgressing mere trends."

In addition to the many senior artists Liu met during his sojourn on the mainland, there were also a number of rising mid-career

artists who shared similar academic backgrounds, having studied with modern masters such as Li Keran, Pan Tianshou Jiang Zhaohe, and Liu Haisu. These were now among the key figures of academicism and constituted a major force in the painting world. They also were poles apart from Liu Guosong in terms of their artistic positions. Take for example the married painters Zhou Sicong (1939–1996) and Lu Chen (1935–2004), who were idolized by the younger generation of artists, and who had a much keener regard for *bimo* than did Liu Guosong, viz.:

From the articulation of form with lines, to the incorporation of calligraphic brushwork into painting, to the appreciation of the nuances of *bimo*—this is the developmental trajectory of Chinese painting. Without these qualities, there is no Chinese painting.

We insist on articulating form with lines, in accordance with our tradition. Line is primary. Volume and plane should be deemphasized.

The centered-tip brush possesses the most expressive force.<sup>1</sup>

Ink painting that deviated from these standards of *bimo* was regarded as heterodox and naturally found it difficult to establish itself or gain legitimization. Under such conditions, Liu Guosong's act of discarding the soft brush and adopting a whole alternative range of techniques in the creation of his paintings should have been regarded as subversive. Yet not only did he not meet with resistance, but he was treated with the utmost courtesy and respect. Wu Guanzhong's (1919–2010) anxiety about "people who will feel discomfited because they won't understand what they're seeing," did not in fact come to pass. People either chose to avoid engaging in any controversy, or were able to extend the conceptual purview of classical aesthetics in order to enable a certain correspondence with the outré methods used in Liu's works; clearly a sign of tolerance and good-will.

Less than four years after Liu Guosong's first exhibition at Beijing's National Gallery [now the National Art Museum of China] in 1983, his paintings had been shown in more than a dozen cities in mainland China. This was an unprecedented development at the time, and can be understood as an expression of China's eagerness to expand its understanding of the outside world during this period of relaxed restrictions; as well as of its hopes of achieving an even greater level of openness and reform. It is no exaggeration to say that Liu Guosong's works sent shockwaves through the mainland art world. The novel effects he achieved on the *xuan* paper surface through his usage of unusual, previously unthought of techniques had people literally gasping in amazement, filling them with admiration for his boldly innovative spirit and rich imagination. But it was the younger generation among his audience who were most excited and inspired. They had no particular attachment to or enduring love of tradition to begin with. Now they saw opening up before them a seductive new world that seemed to have freed itself from the shackles of tradition.

Yet China at this time was not in fact without its own iconoclasts. The use of vigorous, sinuous lines of the painter Wu Guanzhong deviated from the calligraphic line of the *bimo* tradition, while Shi Hu's (b. 1942) methods of creating textural effects were even further removed from that tradition. Just as is the case today, innovations in Chinese painting have always involved a deviation from the mainstream in order to create a new direction. It may be that [at that time] the mainstream was already too powerful

to take much notice of such indicators; or perhaps it was felt that, since Liu Guosong had not emerged from their own camp, there was no real need to make a fuss.

Liu Guosong has the qualities of a natural leader, treating others with both equanimity and infinite patience—qualities which have been indispensable in the promotion of his artistic ideas. His journey across the mainland can be described as a process of disseminating his influence. During this time he not only took full advantage of diverse opportunities to lecture and to engage in artistic discourse; but more importantly, he visited a number of art academies, such as the Central Academy of Art and Design, where he himself taught classes and engaged directly with students. He never viewed teaching as a chore and was happy to demonstrate the different techniques of his creative process, even bringing examples of “Guosong paper” into the classroom; and he was extremely patient in critiquing students’ work. Through this unreservedly generous approach, Liu sought above all to make a contribution towards promoting innovation in modern ink painting on the mainland. Believing that the future hope of Chinese modern art lay in the mainland, his mission was to use his paintings and artistic concepts to influence and promote its further development.

There is no doubt that the open-door reforms of the 1980s presented an auspicious opportunity for Liu Guosong. Not only was he the first Taiwanese painter to exhibit on the mainland, he also was able to share his ideas and spread his influence over a wide arena. There was also a somewhat ironic element present at the beginning of this process, found in the lack of awareness on the part of the mainland’s orthodox camp that the power and influence of Liu Guosong’s artistic ideas would eventually subvert their own authoritative status, making it all the more possible for Liu Guosong to sow the seeds of his influence at this early stage within a relatively welcoming climate.

## 2.

By the mid-1980s, the arts scene in mainland China had become increasingly dynamic and vital. The easing of ideological strictures allowed a concomitant release of people’s repressed inner emotions, and space for the expression of ideas and imagination. The result was a reawakening of the creative urge, a growing confidence in the value of the individual voice, and a desire to somehow make a difference. Looking out at the world through this newly opened window was a heady feeling, akin to discovering a mythic human world where progress developed at a speed that we ourselves could not quite fathom. The power of the wind blowing in from the west was almost overwhelming, as it carried with it all manner of the new and the novel. One always craves what one most lacks: the West brought us information about modern society, and almost overnight became our unquestioned frame of reference.

In the art world, the long-term adherence to a single creative mode was now being challenged by Western modernist painting, whose continuing search for innovative new forms, its ideology of social engagement, respect for free will, and emphasis on personal expression and creativity made it deeply attractive to artists who had been so long constrained by the dictates of what they were told to create. The slogan “conceptual revolution” now became a banner cry for the art world.

But if Chinese painting was to achieve a true conceptual revolution, it could not in fact look to Western modern painting to

provide it with precedents. This is because Chinese ink painting’s characteristics of fluidity, transparency, and sensitivity, which arise directly from the nature of the medium itself, differ fundamentally from Western painting’s characteristics of figuration, layering, and naturalistic description. In fact, in their conceptual and formal language, they constitute two completely different systems.

The reformation of Chinese ink painting through the introduction of elements of Western classical realism which began with Xu Beihong (1895–1953), and which was further cultivated in the academies, was now beginning to take a new turn, towards Western modern painting as the main target of study: but whether it would be able to provide a directly relevant experience for modern Chinese painting was not certain. Given the absence of any grounded experience [of Western art], and the structural boundaries of the *bimo* tradition, for Chinese painters of the time, Western modern art seemed more like a kind of warehouse of different components from which they could pick and choose: you choose color, I choose symbols, he chooses distortion, etc. Concurrent to this was a borrowing or appropriation of elements from native, non-literati forms of traditional art, the methodology of which was pretty much limited to the deconstruction and then piecemeal appropriation of elements of traditional forms such as mural painting, folk painting, paper cuts, and carved stone and brick portraiture. Some artists used this same kind of approach as regards to Liu Guosong’s works, borrowing elements to incorporate into their own compositions; but often these attempts went no further than to appropriate Liu’s textural effects in one area of a painting in order to evoke the semi-accidental flavor of the ink aesthetic.

In neither case did these artists realize that it would not be possible to achieve a true conceptual revolution by trying to effect change from within the tradition. They underestimated the negative impact of *bimo* as the fundamental genetic marker of traditional ink painting. This conceptual insistence on the unassailable sanctity of *bimo* brought to light the greatest failure of artists’ attempts towards innovation during this period: that is, the separation of spirit from language, a double-edged sword that harmed both the old and the new alike. New concepts were unable to develop fully, while the old language forms lost their own kind of perfection and subtle charm.

Nothing can better illustrate this conundrum than the 1985 “Invitational Exhibition of New Works of Chinese Painting” (Zhongguo hua xinzuo yaoqingzhan) organized by the Wuhan Art Museum in Hubei province. Harnessing the keen interest in the ongoing discussion on tradition and innovation in Chinese painting, the exhibition aimed to expand the ranks and achievements of innovators. To this end, the organizers invited a group of twenty-five cutting-edge painters who best represented innovative ink painting at that time. These included Wu Guanzhong, Zhou Sicong, Jia Youfu (b. 1942), Gu Wenda, Zhu Xinjian (b. 1953)—and Liu Guosong. This designation of Liu Guosong as an “emerging” painter clearly was not very well considered, as for over 20 years Liu had been doing what we on the mainland were only beginning to do. From today’s perspective, Liu should be regarded more as a precursor, a direct antecedent in the movement for innovation in ink painting, in the same way as we now regard Xu Beihong and Li Keran. Because Liu Guosong’s artistic language so resolutely rejected the tradition of brush and ink, the specificity of his creative style also served to highlight the problems of other painters, or indeed of the entire modern ink painting movement of the 1980s, who

were unable to free themselves from the conundrum of the calligraphic brush, and thus seemed merely to be dancing in their chains.

The modern ink painting movement in Taiwan during the 1950s did not unfold against the same kind of cultural background as did the movement in mainland China, which was predicated on the works of Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), Jiang Zhaohe, and Li Keran, and received the support of the academic world who promoted it and gave it social legitimization. By contrast, [artists in Taiwan] on the one hand were faced with art had become stale and cliché, and on the other with the dynamism of Western modern art. Liu Guosong thus chose to adopt the standpoint of the West, or rather that of modernism. In his earliest works of this period, he used a plaster painting surface over which ink and oil paints were allowed to flow freely. His aim was to create texture and at the same time to express the particular beauty and sensibility of ink art. This innovative method, with its primary focus on materiality, presented a stark contrast to the work of the other exhibiting painters in the [1985] show and put greater pressure on the mainland's ink painting innovation movement of the 1980s.

Firstly, Xu Beihong and Li Keran's works are products of Chinese painting, as their achievements do not involve a deviation from the traditional norms of *bimo*. In the pedagogy of the Academy, this resulting approach was cast as a reasonable model, and virtually implanted into the sensibility of art students. As a result, and over a long period of time, no one questioned the absolute correctness of this model, and many unconsciously fell into a kind of stereotypical rut. Even in the present, when conceptual revolution is passionately advocated and many use a critical attitude to engage in just that, a kind of contradictory persona is still in evidence. On one side is the warrior battling against the old models, and on the other the defender of the old models. And as such, the resulting attempts at innovation are ridiculed by some as old wine in new bottles.

This kind of contradictory persona is particularly true in the case of Gu Wenda. He clearly grasped the importance of ink art as a uniquely non-Western medium, and also perceived that no one had yet successfully used this medium to penetrate the [conceptual] territory of Western modernism. At this time, he harbored no suspicion that the calligraphic methodology of *bimo* itself might be a strong barrier to achieving this goal. Gu's approach to creating a Western-style painting was to enlarge traditional brush strokes and ink marks on a *xuan* paper surface, a method by which he also meant to pose a challenge to modernism; and which, coincidentally, was also the complete opposite to Liu Guosong's. Gu's attempt to Westernize ink art while preserving the tenets of traditional *bimo*/ink painting/brushwork was equally apparent in the work of other participating artists in the show. They were excessively focused on finding new themes. Li Shinan (b. 1940) painted the Nanjing Massacre, Zhou Sicong scroll mounters, Li Jin (b. 1958) portraits of Tibetans, Yang Yun (1948–2004) design patterns, and Ding Liren (b. 1930) theatrical performances, while Zhu Xinjian (1953–2014) even depicted women with bound feet. Only Wu Guanzhong and Shi Hu seem to have devoted their energies to disentangling themselves from the *bimo* norms, displaying their intention towards developing a more revolutionary language in their use of a formalist approach to gain control over the painting surface. In fact, in their method of distancing themselves from the strictures of *bimo* and its calligraphic nature, there is an element of conceptual revolution; from this perspective, their thinking is close

to that of Liu Guosong, and demonstrates that a true space of innovation can open up for ink painting only when the tyranny and presumed contemporary relevance of classical thought are invalidated.

That Liu Guosong shared the same stage as these other painters was a somewhat awkward situation for both sides. The exhibition was imbued with an aura of impetuosity, with no real thought given to the question of innovative depth on the level of painting language. The overemphasis on critique tended to make Liu Guosong's own painting language appear even more aesthetically beautiful and ethereally spiritual, forming a striking contrast with the relative roughness of the other artists' works. This is likely not only the result of a synchronic difference between Liu and the other artists, but also of cultural dissonance and dislocation.

Whether Liu Guosong's paintings are considered as having a quality of disconnect in the context of mainland China's modern ink painting innovation in the 1980s, or as the perfect result of conditions within a different cultural context, both interpretations tend to downplay its true significance. Although these rebels were regarded by the orthodox academics as barbaric, their attitudes regarding the issue of *bimo* were similar. These artists also disagreed with Liu Guosong's abandonment of the brush, and felt that his use of alternative techniques to produce special effects was too much like craft rather than art, and lacked true expressive meaning. Adding to this the fact that landscape imagery also appeared in his works, they felt that Liu had lost hold of the special characteristics and spirit of Chinese painting, and in terms of artistic conception his art was an incomplete form of innovation. In their view, the conceptual revolution was mainly reflected in the critical awareness evinced in the content of a work. This is the strongest and most representative characteristic of the "85 New Wave," wherein art was still primarily regarded as a critical tool.

From the perspective of cultural critique, the invitational exhibition was indeed an important event of the time; but from the perspective of innovation in [painting] language, it was lacking. Ultimately it demonstrated the difficulty of transcending the constraints of one's time. As Lang Shaojun has pointed out: "Before Liu Guosong's paintings were introduced on the mainland, innovation in Chinese painting was largely limited to combinations of traditional painting methods, Western classical realism, and modernist distortion. There was hardly anyone who had abandoned the use of the soft brush and its corresponding compositional principles.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Liu Guosong had already abandoned the soft brush completely, and turned to other technical modes of production to create his own expressive style, paying particular attention to achieving different textural effects. From process to result, there was nothing in his formal language that was like traditional Chinese painting. Following the introduction into the mainland of this art that deviated both from traditional norms and academicism, the standard modes for modern ink painting were also disrupted. Many young people sought out new expressive methods, experimented with new textural effects, and sought a wider and more rapidly progressive platform towards the modern. This trend towards change was significantly intensified by the publication of Zhou Shaohua's *The Construction of Liu Kuo-sung's Art* (Liu Guosong de yishu goucheng).<sup>3</sup> This book introduced Liu Guosong's artistic concepts and formal techniques, with accompanying illustrations, and demonstrated how different kinds of textural and modeling effects were achieved. It was straightforward, accessible, and easily digestible, and proved to be very popular among the

younger generation. Within only a few years, a variety of methods such as transfer rubbing, wrinkling, collage and the incorporation of new media were being adopted, while a large number of works using special techniques to create different textural effects began to appear regularly in exhibitions. It was clear that a new trend that deviated from the mainstream was taking shape. Yet in those nascent years it did not make much of an impact, and this type of work seldom appeared in the major art publications just before and after 1985. Exceptions were Chang Jin's work in the Sixth Art Exhibition, *Silent Autumn Water* (Qiu shui wu sheng) and Zhou Shaohua's *Source of Great Rivers* (Da he sun yuan). This was because in the former case, the textural effects served to increase the realism of the scene, while in the latter the content was related to themes of revolutionary heroism. It should be noted that two main publications which chronicle the art movements of this period, *History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1985-1986* (Zhongguo dangdai yishu shi 1985-1986) and *History of Modern Chinese Art 1979-1989* (Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi, 1979-1989), fail to include this information.

### 3.

The reason why the mid-1980s was such a dramatic and exciting time for the movement for innovation in Chinese ink painting is that in addition to the "Chinese Painting Invitational Exhibition," there was a large scale and far more sustained discussion about issues of tradition and innovation in Chinese painting. This entire discussion was sparked by Li Xiaoshan's 1985 article "My View of Contemporary Chinese Painting" published in *Jiangsu huakan* (*Jiangsu Pictorial*). He opened this article with the statement: "At this time Chinese painting has already reached a dead end."<sup>4</sup> This was followed by a description of Chinese painting history as "in fact a history of continual refinement in technique (the artistic methods used in the evocation of poetic space) but one of continual deterioration in pictorial conception (understood in terms of aesthetic experience)." He thought that "In the *bimo* of Chinese painting, the stronger the aesthetic ideology of abstraction becomes (because of the emphasis on calligraphy), the more stringent the formalist norms of Chinese painting will be: the result of this will be an increasingly rigid kind of abstract formalism... in fact this accounts for the strong conservatism of Chinese painting in the later period." He further stated: "The first mission of innovation is to change people's worshipful adherence to the strict formalist norms of tradition and to break through the restrictions of the old forms and methods one by one." In this same article, he asserted that Li Keran's and Pan Tianshou's achievements in Chinese painting in fact had a relatively negative impact on future generations. His critique not only hit out at orthodox academicism, but also offended the sensibilities of a number of middle-aged painters under the wing of the academy. "Surveying the entire contemporary Chinese painting scene, we cannot find any among these famous artists who are leaders in the artistic innovation movement that is quietly unfolding before us."<sup>5</sup>

Liu Guosong did not see Li Xiaoshan's article until 1986, when he was paying a visit to Wu Bunai. [After reading it], he made the following comment: "This controversy is inevitable: Taiwan went through the same debate twenty years ago. Mainland China has been closed off to the outside world for too long; never has there been such a flood of cultural information as there is today, and this is particularly true of the influx of all kinds of modernist schools

and styles from the West, which are particularly attractive to the younger generation. In fact, for the mainland, this debate is only just beginning." Although Liu did not agree with Li Xiaoshan's belief that the problems of Chinese painting were incurable, he appreciated Li's critique of tradition, and was glad to see this debate taking place. As early as 1959, Liu had turned away from the path of "total Westernization," with the mission of establishing a new tradition for Chinese painting. In concrete terms, however, his methodology was clearly derived from that of Western modern painting. Yet as regards this current controversy, one did not hear him directly express his own opinion: perhaps he felt that, as an outsider, he had little at stake.

The inclusion of the *bimo* tradition in this debate about innovation was really a case of much ado about nothing. One could even call it ridiculous, that the reason this war of words has lasted for so many years is that its stakeholders could not come up with a convincing method of innovation; and, moreover, believed that whatever they themselves advocated was the correct way. In any case, as far as the academic faction was concerned, Li Xiaoshan had definitely hit a raw nerve. The academic defenders parried by quoting Marx's observations on ancient Greek art as evidence that the *bimo* tradition of Chinese painting "can still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect [can] count as a norm and as an unattainable model." Yet they ignored Marx's further statement that "A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish." And they also ignored Marx's description of the Greeks as "normal children."

Those who opposed Li Xiaoshan insisted that there are limits to innovation, and that it must be rooted in real life, in tradition, and in the pleasure of the people.<sup>6</sup> There were also those who sought to falsely frame the innovation faction as being motivated by resentment of China's backward economy and material life, thus spawning a blind worship of foreign goods and ideas, and that the manner in which they dealt with traditional Chinese painting was merely to make unreasonable and ungrounded criticisms with the ulterior purpose of creating havoc.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to convince people that this kind of malicious and unfounded censure is coming from a purely scholarly motivation; in fact it only confirms the kinds of pressure confronting attempts at innovation. In the final analysis, artistic innovation must be a matter of practice. Abstract theoretical debates remain limited to disputing the pros and cons of tradition, and ultimately no conclusion is reached. As Chen Lusheng has said: "As regards those who wish to continue the tradition, reformers denounce them as being hidebound by convention, out of tune with the times. On the other hand, reformers who wish to forge their own path are denounced by the traditionalists as betraying tradition and lacking their forbears' talent and skills.... And those who attempt to take the middle ground please nobody either. This is indeed a conundrum."<sup>8</sup>

Seeking to cite a suitable example, Xue Yongnian made reference to Liu Guosong in an article: "Liu Guosong, a famous painter of the new generation in Taiwan, first emerged as a rebel against tradition, and boldly led the attack on traditional concepts. Yet in his works executed in the style of what is widely known as Western modern Abstract Expressionism, he does not completely relegate tradition to the trash heap. To the contrary, he cleverly appropriates certain traditional forms into his techniques; examples include his techniques of water-rubbing (*shuituo*) and of plucking out fibers from the paper (*choujin bopi*). In both these cases he creates an effect of brush-and-ink in the same way that 'insects accidentally incise the shapes of letters into wood.'"<sup>9</sup>

Whether this interpretation of Liu Guosong's art is apropos or not, at the end of the day Liu's innovations were judged to be successful. Hang Faji put it more directly: "Whatever the technique, be it traditional *bimo*, finger painting, or a combination of various special effects such as brushing, spraying, rubbing, using Chinese and Western color palettes — all result from a need for expressive form.... If by using alternative methods and tools one is able to achieve the kind of effects in painting suited to modern aesthetic concepts, which are difficult for the [traditional] brush to achieve, then intelligent modernists will refuse to limit their creative expression by sticking only to those existing painting tools produced by human civilization... In 1950s Taiwan, because of his original way of thinking, Liu Guosong rejected the painting circles of his time and stirred up controversy. Looking at his paintings today, we can see that this has also been a route to success."<sup>10</sup>

Although Liu Guosong did not participate directly in the debate [on the mainland], his works were already well known among mainland Chinese painters, and as such they provided those critics who supported innovation with material examples that they could cite. And on the other side, his paintings were also referenced in the academic world. This widespread affirmation and admiration of his innovative methods of creating Chinese paintings undoubtedly were of great benefit in expanding his influence on the mainland.

Still another opportunity opened up to Liu Guosong. In the mainland art scene of the late 1980s, ink painting innovation was still 20 years behind that of Taiwan. It is not possible that mainland ink painters could mature in this short period of time. Even today everyone is still feeling their way. They are committed to the search for an innovative style, yet it is only natural that when this seeking leads them to the outer borders of traditional standards, and they are on the threshold facing the beyond, they feel somewhat at a loss."<sup>11</sup> Liu Guosong has created a set of innovative theories on Chinese painting, and has an impressive record of successful practice. He was the original leader of Taiwan's modern ink painting movement. Thus, it only stands to reason that in the 1980s he again was chosen by the modern ink painting circles on the mainland. Liu Guosong has emerged as a natural leader in this new Chinese painting innovation movement, and his impact and influence are beyond question.

#### 4.

Merely attracting a large flock of followers doesn't necessarily mean that Liu Guosong's painting became a mainstream trend in Chinese ink painting. Once again, it was relegated to the sidelines by another characteristic school of painting that arose out of the mainstream cauldron. This school of reformist ink painting, operating under the constraints of *bimo*, was unable to resist the powerful attraction of the *bimo* tradition. The result was that it soon exhausted its potential, stifling creative innovation by the pursuit of extreme refinement as an end in itself, and its over-focus on producing "masterpieces." This led to the withering away of the astonishing exuberance of the movement's early years. The inherent corruption of the art market also played a significant role. People attributed this return to tradition as nothing more than a biased reaction to the some of the overly superficial aspects of New Art. But few people were aware that the arrogance and self-satisfaction enjoyed by those adherents of the art and culture of ancient classical forms, as well as their smug isolation from the world outside China, was preordained by their early espousal of

*bimo* as the basic grammar and syntax of their painting style. For them, claiming that *bimo* contained the very DNA of traditional Chinese painting was no exaggeration. It sufficed them to use its spirit of restraint as an enticement to distance themselves from anything smacking of rebellion and to return to the fold as acolytes. First came the surrender *en masse* of "New Literati Painting" followed by the "1993 Art Critics' Choice Exhibition," which, while masquerading as scholarship, quietly stabbed the innovative painters in the back. This brought to mind Tao Yongbai's (b. 1937) prescient words: "Around the time of the May Fourth Movement in China, many painters who had studied Western painting abroad returned to China embracing a mission to reform Chinese painting. However, despite their attempts to confront the issue of what lay at the very core of the Spirit of Art, they found themselves unable to resist the seductive allure of the *bimo* painting tradition, and one by one bowed down before the altar of literati painting, once again finding refuge in their weasel-hair brushes, Chinese ink cakes, mulberry paper, and elegantly carved inkstones."<sup>12</sup>

The ink painting section of the 1993 "Critics' Choice Exhibition" was a collective representation of the achievements of the *bimo*-centered painters who had been active over the previous decade. Presented as a series of "masterpieces" of the *bimo* genre, the exhibition was a default critique of the rebels against the *bimo* school *in absentia*. The critics' phraseology resembled nothing less than final court judgements, which revealed how developments in contemporary ink painting from the 1980s had been manipulated by authoritarian language. This explains why experimental ink painting not of the *bimo* variety was consigned to the margins.

The key pronouncements of the 1993 exhibition contained many examples of biased language: "Those innovationist painters with deep roots in ink painting practice, including Gu Wenda, Chen Xiangxun (b. 1956), Tian Liming (b. 1962), Li Xiaoxuan (b. 1959), and Wang Yanping (b. 1962), have achieved some moderate successes.... As for those proponents of New Ink Painting who lack such roots, while their courage cannot be denied, they have had a hard time establishing successful careers."<sup>13</sup> Here *bimo* refers not only to a formal technique, but rather a preordained force that can turn into a matter of life or death for a painter. The so-called "rootless yet courageous New Ink painters" is simply a reference to those who, after distancing themselves from the rules and regulations of *bimo*, chose to utilize unconventional painting materials, or wield their brushes in nontraditional ways. Thus they end up "fabricating" paintings that bear little relationship to Chinese calligraphy [the "root" of traditional Chinese painting], and thus lack the textural qualities of traditional ink painting. It is well known that Liu Guosong was the very first perpetrator, as well as a propagator, of this kind of artistic creation.

We have been accustomed to thinking of Liu Guosong's paintings as "fabricated" [rather than created with a brush, due to his novel methods], an impression gained when his works were compared to Chinese brush-generated *bimo* painting. While this is certainly an objective evaluation, Liu's works also represent a form of expression that is in an entirely different category from traditional *bimo*. The problem lies in the way both late-period Chinese literati painters and contemporary *bimo*-centered painters all emphasized *bimo*'s "sacred nature," treating it as sacrosanct and inviolable. In their eyes, therefore, Liu Guosong was a cardinal sinner. Pay close attention to the following words of those who have been regarded as "brilliant" painters, and perhaps you can



**FIG 2** Liu Guosong  
*Which Is Earth, No. 1*, 1969  
 Ink and acrylic with collage on paper  
 52.76 × 30.71 in (134 × 78 cm)

discern where Liu has stood in their estimation. Note too how these critics aligned themselves with the *bimo*-centered artists, and were as incompatible with Liu Guosong as fire with water, viz.: "At times like this, we must firmly retain our Chinese National Essence; we must cherish ink painting and pass it on to our descendants; we must continue to further its development."<sup>14</sup> "I still believe that creativity in Chinese painting inevitably rests in the practice of *bimo* techniques."<sup>15</sup> Even more shockingly, some artists, based solely on their personal creative practices, pronounced definitively that ink painting was incapable of conveying the [deepest] personal experiences and the struggles of emotional turmoil: "If [one's expressive need] reaches that degree, then one should find another kind of painting to accommodate it."<sup>16</sup> Why should innovative painters be obligated to cherish *bimo*? Considering the present pathetic state to which classical ink painting language has deteriorated, to point out that New Ink painting is equally impotent, basically tossing the entire movement into a prison and throwing away the key, suggests the appalling depths of degeneration to which the human spirit has sunk. Liu Guosong was also aware that the pictorial language of traditional ink painting was inappropriate in the context of present-day reality. And so he adopted an entirely different attitude: he not only gave up Western art media entirely in favor of Chinese ink and *xuan* paper, he adopted the slogan, "Down with the centered-tip brush [*zhong-feng*]!"—the traditional way of wielding a Chinese paintbrush. His ink paintings not only express the most intimate personal feelings, as *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* but are also capable of conveying the subjective human experience. The latter achievement is best exemplified in Liu's *Which Is Earth* of 1969, a reflection of how the Apollo 7 mission to the Moon provided mankind with an entirely new world view (Fig. 2). Liu Guosong demonstrates that New Ink painting can indeed serve the present—but only after undergoing a thorough metamorphosis.

As innovations in ink painting continued to take place through the 1990s, the hegemony of *bimo*-centrism was revealed to be a series of false propositions through the actual creative practice of the innovative painters. Among the works shown at the 1993 Critic's Choice Exhibition, a good number made use of a pictorial language quite alien to the *bimo* critics, which made it nearly impossible for them to analyze and describe the paintings in terms drawn from the *bimo* lexicon. For example, in their exploratory works, Tian Liming, Hai Rihan (b. 1958), and Chen Xiangxun drew on elements of the classical ink painting vocabulary to achieve *bimo* outcomes. Thus to apply the critical language of *bimo* to such painters was akin to dismissing outright the actual meaning and value of the new forms of pictorial language. As a result, the new spirit of their art failed to receive a proper interpretation. At this affair, criticism simply played a toxic role.

To demonstrate the synchronicity of *bimo*'s utility, or the logic of upholding *bimo*-centric thinking, in the 1993 Critics' Exhibition key statement, Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), Huang Binhong (1865–1955), and Qi Baishi (1864–1957) were upheld in present day terms as successful innovators, a notion as absurd as attempting to fit the foot to the shoe. Language is nothing more than a means of communication, while innovation is an activity that takes place in its own context. No matter how successful the artists who came before Qi Baishi, it is unreasonable to use their example to prove the claim that the innovative painters of today are the inheritors of Wu, Huang and Qi's concepts or methods. Wu Changshuo's argument, "In discussing the art of the absolute, there is nothing

more to say than this: painting derives directly from calligraphy" is similar to Zhao Mengfu's (1254–1322) statement, "Paint rocks with alternating dabs of ink and voids; paint trees with strokes utilized in ancient calligraphy; paint bamboo according to the canonical 'eight strokes.'" Although Huang BinHong wrote, "In order to create an original style of their own, painters must strive to exceed the limitations, in terms of technique and approach, of the painters that came before them." In another context, he expressed similar views: "When the brush should be level, it should be like an awl drawing in sand; when the brush should be round, it should be like sections of a circular hairpin, as malleable as gold; when the brush should linger, it should be like a water leak leaving stains on a wall; when the brush should be heavy, it should be like rocks falling off a tall mountain." Furthermore, Huang stated clearly, "By ignoring the cardinal rules of painting, it is impossible to make use of the many subtleties inherent in brushwork." While Qi Baishi said, "Without true innovation, one cannot surpass pass masters," his most striking and emphatic proclamation is the following poem:

Qingteng [Xu Wei, 1521–1593] and Xuege [Bada Shanren, 1626–1705] were no ordinary beings  
Foulao [Wu Changshuo] in his old age was of exceptional brilliance.  
I am willing to be a "running dog" in the afterlife  
In order to be reincarnated as a student of the three masters.

Producing innovations in a field choked by rules and regulations is indeed challenging. Qi Baishi makes this point clearly in an inscription on one of his paintings: "As a painter, it is difficult *not* to emulate and imitate older painters. My landscapes resemble those of Bada Shanren; my bird and flower paintings take after Litang [Meng Jinyi]; my paintings of rocks evoke [Zhou] Shaobai. The painters cited by Qi are all great masters who, working within the permissible strictures of traditional painting, produced masterpieces in the classical style that represented the final blaze of glory of this school of painting. We can never forget that time never stops. Today, the relevance of the innovative culture of *shuimo* is the result of changing times. As Liu Guosong has written: "Thanks to ever more frequent contacts between East and West, and deepening mutual understanding, the differences between the two great artistic cultures have gradually diminished. This is an ongoing historical process. The emergence of a unified world culture combining Eastern and Western cultural traditions is only a matter of time."<sup>17</sup> The difference between Liu's outlook and that of Qi Baishi and his confreres reveals that the two exist at two distinct temporal and spatial crossroads.

Liu Guosong has stated that after immersing himself in both Western and Eastern culture, he aligned himself with the Chinese people and Chinese culture, and set out to create contemporary Chinese works of art that preserved the best traits of traditional Chinese painting while drawing on the strengths of Western painting. In his own words, "If Chinese painters of this generation want to climb down from the horns of the dilemma that is Chinese painting, and liberate themselves from the evil habit of merely copying ancient works, then they must stir up revolution. But who is the real enemy? The centered-tip of a traditional Chinese paint-brush, and the brush itself." "Painters must have full authority over their choice of materials and techniques." "The centered-tip Chinese brush is just one of a raft of brush techniques, and the brush itself is just one of a multiplicity of artists' tools."<sup>18</sup>

Through his words and actions, Liu Guosong established new limits for contemporary ink painting. Beginning in the 1960s, he ceaselessly explored new formal languages to apply in his paintings. His oeuvre can be divided into four periods, through which we can trace a course of logical development. In the 1960s, he began with straight strokes with a wide brush, then moved on to larger, slightly pointed brushes and horizontal strokes that evoked a sense of motion. He created novel textures by incorporating rubbing technique in his works by utilizing the folds and creases in canvas and paper. He pasted torn paper to the surface of his paintings to create chiaroscuro effects that were more varied and natural than what a brush could produce. Around 1964, he began using collage to give his paintings greater physical depth, and added hard-edge geometrical shapes to his tool-kit. He used turpentine to transfer magazine illustrations to paper, and drew on contemporary graphic design to create balanced arrangements in his increasingly abstract compositions. From 1969 to 1974, his geometric collaged images evolved into his "Space paintings," as he used airbrush techniques to launch himself into the Space Age. In 1972 he discovered the technique of "water rubbing," which produced works that combined abstraction with elements of the monumental and unexpected. Over the course of twenty years, he employed a wide range of techniques in a search for different outcomes, including screen printing, rubbing, scratching-scraping, tearing, collage, steeping and washes, as it were exhausting the contents of the alchemist's cauldron. In the words of the poet-painter Chu Ge (1931–2011), "Liu Guosong's paintings are the epitome of China's glorious ideals of naturalism, combining spirit and form."<sup>19</sup>

Liu Guosong's successful experience in ink painting innovation suggests that Chinese ink painting can be considered a contemporary open system in which "*bimo*" is not the sole medium of innovation. That contradicts the proponents of the *bimo*-centered school who claim that the further painters move away from innovative *bimo*, the less chance they have of success. Liu Guosong's cardinal lesson, and his most important legacy, is that by creating a new form of ink painting expression that is completely at odds with tradition, he demonstrated that an innovative style of painting that strays from the confines of orthodox *bimo* can also be successful.

At the 1993 Critics' Choice exhibition, Wang Linyi made a statement that is very much to the point: "Academic constructivism places any advances in language within the basic context of tradition to satisfy the needs of the academy." Peng De was even more blunt: "The supremacy of *bimo* can certainly be justified, but to apply the tenets of *bimo*-centered criticism to all the works in the exhibition, not to mention art in general, is potentially dangerous, and overlooks numerous hidden potentialities."<sup>20</sup> It is rather absurd that the debates in China over innovation in ink painting always seem to begin with "*bimo*" vs. "*non-bimo*" and "painting" vs. "fabrication." The question of "fabrication" always brings Liu Guosong to the table; yet oddly enough, his name was hardly mentioned during the exhibition. Yet in both written and spoken statements from the exhibition, one could clearly sense his presence. For example, "In the twentieth century, all too many innovative painters can be accused of overreach (referring to copying early works; author's note) in their methods and attitudes by rejecting *bimo* altogether and pursuing heterodox genres." The success of Zhou Sicong, Li Shinan, and Chen Ping [b. 1962] proves that *bimo* can thrive in new forms. By comparison: "Few ink painting innovators who reject *bimo* have successful careers."<sup>21</sup>

In discussing spiritual and linguistic developments that take place simultaneously, one critic opined: "Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many innovative artists have paid serious attention to certain areas in the spiritual realm, while by comparison they have shown little interest in creative explorations in the realm of language. As a result, their attempts to express the spiritual tend towards superficiality; what we see is basically "old wine in new bottles." On the other hand, another critic wrote: "Some writers make a big fuss about the 'language revolution' and 'language self-discipline,' and then carry out purely formalistic and instrumental experiments that are entirely lacking in thought and substance—mere empty shells consisting of dots, lines and planes. Their language may make their phraseology sparkle, but it lacks meaning. In fact, they have a specific job to do. How to deal with such people as Liu Guosong, the New Ink painter and prime representative of the artists who revere language experiments? What standards of success can be applied to innovation? That depends on one's enthusiasm for a particular innovative practice. Broadly speaking, over the past few years, as innovation in ink painting has taken off, the disciples of *bimo* style have tended to rely increasingly on meticulous refinement. This has resulted in draining Chinese ink painting of its pioneering spirit and former intensity. At the same time, practices with experimental tendencies have increasingly proven their vitality."<sup>22</sup> As Jia Fangdi said in his presentation: 'When a painter adopts *shuimo* (ink painting) as his artistic language, he produces *bimo*; if a painter uses *shuimo* as a material, he cannot produce *bimo*. The last few years have seen the emergence of a number of young painters who have already achieved noticeable advances in *shuimo* painting, suggesting that it has the potential for further development.'<sup>23</sup>

In the ten years spanning the period from 1983, when Liu Guosong first showed his works in China, to the 1993 Critics' Choice Exhibition, both social and private life in China underwent monumental changes. The ink painting innovation movement has also evolved significantly. Starting out from a conceptual revolution faced with linguistic obstacles, the movement emerged from a state of inertia, stuck in the gap between Chinese tradition and Western culture. As it gained greater awareness of language, it reached a point where academism was no longer a dominant force, and artistic innovation was welcomed in a climate of diversity and openness. As these developments were taking place, it became easier to see clearly the significance and value of Liu Guosong and his work today. That is, artistic innovations that deviated from the *bimo* tradition have proven to be the most unflinching response to the question of *bimo* since the May Fourth Period. The fact that the former rose in prominence in such a short time demonstrates that ink art no longer is circumscribed by the baggage of belonging to a tradition that is higher than the artists themselves. In other words, the medium of ink painting has once again returned to parity with its practitioners. This outcome is consistent with the objectives and intentions of the innovation movement, which is not avowedly antagonistic towards tradition—as expressed succinctly in the most popular Cultural Revolution slogan, "destroy the old, replace with the new." Rather than destroy, Liu Guosong's ideal was to build a twentieth-century school of Chinese ink painting that ran parallel to tradition, not to erect a new structure atop a heap of ruins. This is a broadminded, idealistic and visionary aspiration, tantamount to an authentic cultural revolution.

## 5.

The year 1993 was a watershed for contemporary ink painting. The critics' predilection for *bimo*-centered theory and their misguided criticism of innovative styles left people on both sides of the argument unhappy. We can reasonably state that the Exhibition both promoted and defended the claim that the anachronistic academism drawn upon by the New Literati painters was still "brilliant art." At the same time, the exhibition marked the culmination of a period in the annals Chinese painting history dominated by *bimo* centrism. A new era in the development of contemporary ink painting had begun.

One could see this change taking place as Chinese art magazines began to publish more articles about contemporary ink painting. The authors of these articles were mainly young critics, whose language, selection of topics, analytical methods and even literary style differed radically from earlier critics' more conventional writings. Compared to the mindset of the earlier generation of culturally conservative critics, the young critic outlook was based on "a contemporary worldview, in which former habits, constrained by geographic isolation, limited communications and certain genetically determined tendencies, were discarded by the human community of the present day. Identifying with a number of propositions, these young critics discussed contemporary *shuimo* in the context of Western cultural supremacy and Orientalism, and also dealt with other issues facing *shuimo*, for instance, Do the materials used in *shuimo* have any meaningful application in China today? And if so, how might they be used?<sup>24</sup> Another important event around this time was the appearance of the inaugural issue of the annual publication, *New Tendencies in Late Twentieth Century Ink Painting* (Ershi shijimo Zhongguo xiandai *shuimo* zoushi), the first in a series that focused on documenting experimental *shuimo* art in China. It aimed to chronicle the development of late twentieth-century experimental ink art, and in subsequent issues followed several individual artists in order to provide a detailed record of their careers. The series was actually a museum in book form, filling its pages with illustrations of experimental ink art that in the past would have never seen the light of day. Of similar interest was the revamped periodical *Gallery* (Hualang), which devoted space to experimental ink art in a series of "Reports from the Artist's Studio." Publications of this nature have made a significant contribution towards giving prominence to experimental ink art, rescuing it from the margins of the Chinese art world. Just as experimental *shuimo* was being showcased in print form, the China Art Museum in Beijing held an exhibition entitled "'95 Tension and Expression Ink Painting Exhibition" ['95 Zhangli yu biaoxian *shuimo* zhan], which showed a number of artists whose work deviated from traditional *bimo*. This sparked new discussions around statements such as "If New Literati *bimo* is one page in art history, then we have already turned that page." However, those who attended the exhibition were more concerned with the question of "language." The fact that "language" became so controversial revealed that the general trend of the exhibition contradicted the exhibition organizers' stated theme of "calligraphic painting." This gave rise to the realization that the model of *bimo*-centered criticism was increasingly out of step with present-day creative practices, and lacked the vocabulary to satisfactorily interpret the new "language" of painting. This was also an indication that innovative ink art had reached the stage of a kind of linguistic self-discipline and construction, thus bringing the language of ink art in its

contemporary transformation ever closer to a wider recognition and acceptance.

The rising influence of New Ink painting would not have taken place without Liu Guosong. As a movement, the new approach to ink painting/*shuimo* now threatened to overtake the anachronistic model of calligraphic *bimo*. However, while altering prejudiced viewpoints is always problematic, it was now possible to see major changes taking place in formerly biased criticism. In the 1993 edition of the annual publication, *New Tendencies in Late Twentieth-Century Ink Art*, Liu Xiaochun commented on the way Lin Fengmian, Xu Beihong, and Li Keran borrowed Western techniques to invigorate Chinese painting, adding: "Three powerful figures who took giant steps towards modernizing Chinese painting and who even more vociferously opposed tradition are Liu Guosong, Wu Guanzhong, and Yuan Yunsheng [b. 1937]. They share a peculiar characteristic: they have little patience for people who argue about *bimo*. On the other hand, whenever *bimo* attracted attention, they went out of their way to exaggerate its shortcomings. This is not to underestimate the important position of the artists in Chinese art history. Rather, it is an attempt to maintain historical objectivity and keep an eye on where contemporary ink art is heading and what it is capable of accomplishing."<sup>25</sup> And in a 1994 publication on new trends in late twentieth-century *shuimo*, Lang Shaojun wrote: "To create from the very beginning a new language system entirely separate from the language of *bimo*, one that can communicate a multi-dimensional spiritual world, and function alongside the language system of classical Chinese ink painting as an equal, is a nearly inconceivable task. The school of non-*bimo* (*fei bimo*) of which Liu Guosong is the leading exponent has already been around for thirty years. This school has a numerous and wide-spread group of followers. However, their novel pictorial language that uses rubbing, printing and other unconventional techniques displays a poverty of expression and a plethora of other limitations. At best, it can play a supplementary and reformist role in the language of *bimo*, but it still has a long, long way to go before it can be recognized as a legitimate new language system."<sup>26</sup> In 1995, Liu Xiaochun, the curator of the 1995 "Tension and Expression: An Exhibition of *Shuimo* Painting," mentioned Liu Guosong in an essay in which he listed the perpetrators of the crisis facing contemporary Chinese ink painting:

1. Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi, Huang Binhong, and Pan Tianshou
2. Lui Shou-Kwan [Lü Shoukun, 1919-1975]  
Liu Guosong, Wu Guanzhong, and Zao Wou-ki  
[Zhao Wujie, 1920-2013];
3. American and European artists who appropriate elements of Chinese painting and calligraphy in their works;
4. Four awkward topics that the Japanese *bokushō* calligraphers cannot avoid confronting.

In the conclusion to his essay, Liu Xiaochun added: "The present dissatisfaction with the pioneering artists Liu Guosong, Wu Guanzhong, and Zao Wou-ki will actually serve as a catalyst for the continued development of the form and style of contemporary ink painting."<sup>27</sup>

If we recall what the major *bimo*-centric critics said in the past, then this more recent criticism reveals a major turnaround: from a basic denial of Liu's painting methods and pronouncements on art to a new acceptance and recognition of their role as a harbinger

for the future. This is indeed progress! However, reforming an entire way of critical thinking is easier said than done. If specific obstacles arise in the course of this reform, requiring judgments on issues of meaning and value, those critics may unconsciously return to their past ways.

## 6.

The twenty-first century will soon be upon us. Compared to 1982, when Liu Guosong showed his paintings in major cities on the mainland, today's innovative ink painting movement has undergone major changes. Regarding the recent history of ink painting in China, we should remember that in the past the entire genre had always been reliant upon the Chinese brush, and a small number of brushstrokes, such as hooks, dabs, dots, and washes; these limitations also applied for painters who were considered even slightly unconventional. In the 1950s and 1960s, painters eager to depict New China in their works borrowed a bit of chiaroscuro and a pinch of realism from Western drawing techniques, and aped Qi Baishi's artistic strategies by incorporating subjects that traditional literati painters would not deign to depict, as well as shiny new things like cars and high-voltage power lines; this was enough for them to convince themselves that they had revolutionized Chinese painting. At the same time, their creative imaginations were handcuffed by the catechism of traditional conventions, just as their tools for self-expression were limited to the singular Chinese brush. This arrested development and snail-like progress marched in step with China's closed-door policies at the time. Artists celebrated minor stylistic experiments as if they were great leaps forward, while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamism and progress of the outside world. This may explain how, when China opened up on multiple fronts in the late 1970s, artists took a closer look at Shi Lu, Pan Tianshou, and Li Keran, formerly regarded as renegades, and realized that their works were not so different from conventional painting after all.

Following in the footsteps of the 1950s and 1960s artists, Gu Wenda used his artistic genius to develop their "revolution" to an extreme, but his success would also spark an outpouring of artless and facile expressions. Many self-appointed avant-garde Chinese painters unleashed their brushes with abandon on *xuan* paper in the most savage manner, producing calligraphic abstractions that no one could make heads or tails of. The result of this was that ink painting was soon pushed aside by mainstream Chinese contemporary art, which had gradually come to resemble Western contemporary art. Consequently, it was generally believed that contemporary ink painting was pursuing an entirely different trajectory from the main trends in contemporary art, and that the medium of Chinese ink on paper had exhausted all of its potential, so that it no longer reflected the practical problems of the day.

This is only one indication that China's "Reform and Opening" could not be accomplished overnight, and points to the difficulty of reforming entrenched ideas and behaviors that are taken for granted; a matter of social, rather than individual awareness. For centuries Chinese society consisted of a great mass of thinking creatures who lived a state of inertia. Without the intervention of an external force, China would have remained in that state for ages. Art is a beneficiary of an open, reforming society. Along with the gradual influx of the material and spiritual culture of the advanced Western nations, much Western art was imported to China as well. Western art books filled the library shelves of Chinese art

academies, and played a major role in both teaching and research at those institutions. Only against a background of such extensive cultural openness could Li Guosong seize the opportunity to show his paintings in China, and exert his influence as an outside force that breathed new life into Chinese painting.

(Translation by Valerie C. Doran and Don J. Cohn)

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## Notes

- 1 See Liu Lihu (ed.), *Lu Chen lun shuimo* [Lu Chen on Ink Art] (Hubei: Hubei meishu chubanshe, 1990).
- 2 Lang Shaojun, "Liu Guosong zai Dalu" [Liu Kuo-sung in Mainland China], *Longyu: Wenwu yishu* (Dragon Roots), November 1992, 81-87. [Also published in *Journal of the Taiwan Museum of Art* [Taiwan meishu: Taiwan shengli meishuguan guankan] 18 (1992): 37-41]
- 3 [Zhou Shaohua, *Liu Guosong de yishu goucheng* (Wuhan: Hubei meishu chubanshe, 1985)]
- 4 Li Xiaoshan, "Dangdai Zhongguo hua zhi wo jian" [My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting], *Jiangsu huakan* 1985, no. 7: 2-3.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Ding Tao, "Dangdai Zhongguo hua zhi wo jian' du hou" [After Reading "My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting"], *Jiangsu huakan* 8 (1985).
- 7 See Liu Longting, "Fazhan Zhongguo hua yao paiyu ganrao" [Remove the Interference in the Development of Chinese Painting], in *Meishu lunji* [Collected Discussions on Art], vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), 276-77
- 8 Chen Lusheng, "Zhongguo hua wuxu 'chuangxin'" [Chinese Painting Does Not Need 'Innovation'], *Jiangsu huakan* 1986, no. 1.
- 9 Xue Yongnian, "Meishu lunping duanxiang" [Some Thoughts on Art Theory and Criticism], in *Meishu* [Fine Art] 1987, no. 3.
- 10 Hang Faji, "Qiantan dangdai Zhongguo hua" [A Brief Discussion of Contemporary Chinese Painting], *Jiangsu huakan* 1985, no. 11.
- 11 Li Jiangling, "Bashi niandai yilai Zhongguo hua wenti taolun zongshu" [A Summary of Discussions on Issues in Chinese Painting since the 1980s], in *Meishu sichao* (The Trend of Art Thought) 1985, no. 9.
- 12 Tao Yongbai, "Wu Guanzhong shuimo yishu tan" [Wu Guanzhong's Discussions on Ink Art], *Yingchun hua* 1991, no. 4.
- 13 Lang Shaojun, "Zai pipingjia timingzhan xueshu huiyi shang de zhongxin fayan" [Keynote Speech at the Academic Conference of the Critics' Choice Exhibition], *Duoyun* 1984, no. 2.
- 14 Zhang Lichen's comments in "Pipingjia timing zhan xueshu yantaohui fayan gaoyao" [Summary of Speeches at the Academic Symposium on the Critics' Choice Exhibition], *Duoyun* 1994, no. 2.
- 15 Chen Ping's comments in *ibid.*
- 16 Jiang Hongwei's comments in *ibid.*
- 17 Liu Guosong, "Tan huihua de jiqiao (xia)" [On Technique in Painting (Part 2)], *Sing Tao Daily* [Xingdao ribao], November 19, 1976. [Translated in this Reader, 100-103.]
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Chu Ge, "Tian ren zhi ji: Liu Guosong de huihua yu shidai" [Between Heaven and Man: Liu Kuo-sung's Paintings and Times], *The Companion Pictorial* [Liangyou huabao] (Hong Kong) (March 1985): 24-27.
- 20 Peng De's comments in "Pipingjia timingzhan xueshu yantaohui fayan zhaiyao."
- 21 Lang Shaojun [see note 12].
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Jia Fangdi's comments in "Pipingjia timingzhan xueshu yantaohui fayan zhaiyao."
- 24 See Wang Nanming, "Xin Ruxue yu xiandai shuimohua de wenhua baoshou zhuyi" [New Confucianism and Cultural Conservatism in Modern Ink Painting], *Jiangsu huakan* 1996, no. 3.
- 25 Liu Xiaochun, "Tichang buduan" [Improving Strengths and Supplementing Weaknesses], in *Ershi shiji mo Zhongguo xiandai shuimohua zoushi* [The Artistic Trend of Modern Chinese Ink and Wash in the Late 20th Century], vol. 1, 'Dangdai shuimo congshu' (Modern Ink and Wash Painting Series), (Tianjin: Tianjin yangliuqing huashe, 1993).
- 26 Lang Shaojun, "Guanyu tansuoxing shuimo" [On Experimental Ink Art], in *ibid.*, vol. 2.
- 27 Liu Xiaochun, "Zhangli yu biaoxian" [Tension and Expression], *Jiangsu huakan* 1996, no. 4: 5.

## TRADITION AND ANTI-TRADITION: ON LIU KUO-SUNG'S RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION 1985

I FIRST HEARD OF Liu Kuo-sung in the late 1950s, when I founded the magazine *Modern Literature* (*Xiandai wenxue*) with my classmates at National Taiwan University. He was an advocate of modernism and a founding member of the Fifth Moon Painting Group, as well as one of the first abstract painters in Taiwan. Back then I was likewise absorbed in modernism and, despite never having met him, held him in high regard as a forerunner and a colleague.

At the time, to advocate the "modern" was already to open oneself to the charge of rejecting tradition. Liu went further in being vocally "anti-tradition." In art and literature, those who promoted modernity were in the minority. When Fifth Moon mounted its second exhibition, everyone at *Modern Literature* turned up in support and celebration, in part to prove that we were not alone.

While the Fifth Moon Painting Society and *Modern Literature* both promoted modernism, both were also against complete westernization and against transplanting western art and literary forms onto Taiwan. In my recollection of the exhibition, Chuang Che's works were completely abstract, whereas Liu Kuo-sung's were abstract but retained vague traces of classical Chinese landscapes. It was evident that despite being "anti" tradition, Liu did not completely sever himself from it.

### Liu's generosity towards friends

A quarter-century later, Liu Kuo-sung's paintings have progressed to a new level. By that time, he had visited many of China's famous mountains and rivers in person, experienced reflected in the impressive force of his majestic and capacious landscapes. They were modern paintings but infused with a Chinese flavor—distinctly new creations that drew from and built upon the past.

Even today, we are still exploring new possibilities for modern literature, but all those years ago Kuo-sung had already amply demonstrated that being "anti-tradition" was in order to transcend tradition, to open a new realm for Chinese art, and to establish new milestones.

Kuo-sung is a native of Shandong, a region that historically produced men of valor. While he lacks the physical stature of a stereotypical Shandong horseback bandit, his magnanimity and strong sense of justice recall the heroes of *wuxia* novels. He and his wife [Li Mohua] have changed little over the decades. I remember when the couple, then newly married, lived at the Taipei Botanical Garden. They were of modest means, with Mohua working to supplement their income, but their home was often filled with friends. Mohua was the chef in the family, and so Kuo-sung, a loving husband, tasked himself with cooking rice. Mohua enjoyed making elaborate dishes and completely

immersed herself in it. One time, she bought the dishes to the dining table after being in the kitchen for hours and turned to Kuo-sung, asking, "Where's the rice?"

"Already done!"

He opened the electric rice-cooker to find only the rice uncooked and submerged in lukewarm water: he had forgotten to connect the rice-cooker to the electric outlet.

An exceedingly generous friend, Kuo-sung never shies away from giving his honest opinion in conversations with fellow artists. He has also lost friendships for being too forthright. If a friend is in need, he unfailingly does his utmost to help. He even finds ingenious ways to lend money to friends who are too proud to ask for it, including forcing them to accept his aid. And after he lends someone money, he never asks for it back. In this respect, he is very "traditional."

Kuo-sung cares deeply about his reputation but has little regard for money. If he is uninterested in painting a certain subject or in painting at all, he refuses to pick up a brush no matter how much he is offered as an advance.

Painting for a friend, however, is altogether a different matter.

### Insistently following his own path

A doctor who had successfully treated Kuo-sung's friend wanted a painting by him in lieu of payment. At the time, Kuo-sung's works were selling for several thousand dollars apiece in the United States, and the friend was hard-pressed by the request. When Kuo-sung heard about this, he immediately sent the doctor a painting, effectively repaying the friend's debt.

Last year, Shiing-shen Chern and his wife, long admirers of Kuo-sung, tasked me with obtaining for a painting from him on their behalf. I hesitated for several months before passing their request to Kuo-sung, who however accepted with little hesitation. To congratulate the elderly Mr. Chern on his accomplishments in mathematics, which had made all Chinese proud, Kuo-sung even had the painting mounted before sending it over.

As a painter, Kuo-sung is completely unconstrained by rules. He constantly experiments with new techniques and different kinds of paper and pigments. Even more remarkably, he never withholds the fruits of his labor and shares them freely with fellow artists and with his students. Already in the 1960s, he explained to Chu Ge how he painted his astronauts: he first made rough sketches in turpentine-based paint on *xuan* paper and then used a pencil to refine and articulate the amorphous washes. Chu Ge tried this method and found it to be indeed effective.

In the winter of 1979, Kai-yu Hsu and I visited Kuo-sung in Iowa City. We looked at his recent works in his studio and asked him about his latest technical innovations. He told us everything

without reservation, starting with paper and ink, impressing me greatly. At the end, he even produced the custom-made paper that he had ordered from Taipei and invited Kai-yu to try it.

The 20th century has seen the rise and fall of many cultural movements. In painting, a new trend begins every few years. By contrast, Kuo-sung has always insisted on following his own path, disregarding trends, let alone the art market. As a practitioner, teacher, and theorist of painting, he has steadfastly maintained his independence and freedom.

What I respect most about Kuo-sung is his wholehearted devotion to art. He is equally fluent in painting and in art criticism. When abstract painting first appeared in Taiwan, it was inevitably subjected to misunderstanding, denigration, and even coordinated attacks. Kuo-sung defended abstract painting on behalf of young avant-garde artists like himself, fearlessly engaging authority figures in a war of words. His courage was truly remarkable.

In Taiwan in the 1950s and 60s, being put under a "red hat" was a terrifying prospect. I often think that I embarked on a literary career despite my lack of talent because of a certain fear of political repression. The vagueness and obscurity of some modern poetry was an indirect reflection of this reality.

When it comes to art, Liu Kuo-sung has always preferred to be straightforward.

In 1961, the eminent Sinologist Xu Fuguan wrote some articles criticizing abstract painting, proclaiming that Surrealist artists "have no choice but to forge a path for the Communist world."

Unintimidated, Kuo-sung wrote several erudite and sharply-worded rebuttals, finally forcing Mr. Xu to reconsider his views.

### Speaking of Ma Desheng

At a time when the Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibitions were dominated by *Tōyōga* and senior painters, Kuo-sung stood up for young artists and Chinese painting. In an open letter to the head of the Department of Education, he identified problems and demanded reform. He believed that in art only progress and regress mattered, and not status or age. Kuo-sung deserves credit for laying the groundwork for modern painting to thrive in Taiwan as it has today.

Given the history of modern art in Taiwan, it should be little surprise that modern painting is currently subjected to similar denigration and criticism in mainland China. Five years ago, a few young artists mounted a small exhibition called Stars Art Exhibition (*Xingxing meizhan*) in Beijing. The abstract painters among them continue to be marginalized even now.

In 50s and 60s Taiwan, modern painters were ignored and ridiculed, and occasionally terrorized with being "red-hatted" by

some overzealous writers, but the government did not intervene. Painters still had the freedom to defend themselves, to exhibit their works and organize themselves (after Fifth Moon came the Ton Fan Painting Society), and to study abroad. Many have become influential figures in the international art world.

Mainland China has become much more liberal in recent years. Its intellectuals have become more accepting of diverse schools of thought and increasingly affirm the principle of the freedom of creative expression. Sadly, however, there are still too many bureaucratic overseers of art and literature. From national and Party officials to local security personnel to leaders of political units, far too many people have the power of censorship over art. Take the abstract painter Ma Desheng as an example. An official notice from the Bureau of Public Security to the effect that "The Stars Art Exhibition is still under review" was enough to deny him the opportunity of going abroad for further study, no matter the enthusiasm and appreciation of European art academies. It is nothing but evidence of the Bureau of Public Security's incompetence that it has taken more than five years to investigate a tiny exhibition. Moreover, other participants in Stars have already left China. Even an artist who was imprisoned has been released early and married abroad. Why is the Bureau forcing Ma Desheng to stay? Only to prove that it is somehow correct in its inability to understand his paintings.

His hopes to go abroad dashed, Ma Desheng plans to exhibit his works in Beijing, but has been unable to rent a space anywhere. He cannot even to rent a painting studio. Currently, he and two brothers share a 9-meter room, forcing him often to paint in bed. To be rejected at home is to be expected, and to be appreciated abroad is not allowed—it is considered an injury to national pride. [The authorities even removed] the street sign of Chaibang Hutong [presumably where Ma Desheng lived] to thwart foreign admirers unfamiliar with Beijing.

To paint abstractly is not to steal or to rob. Why is it treated as a crime?

It would be best for the mainland to avoid the mistakes that Taiwan made. I hope there will be more modern painters who, like Liu Kuo-sung, dare to break rules and speak their minds. If so, we can look forward to more breakthroughs in the field of Chinese painting.

October 1985, Berkeley.

(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

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Yu Kwang-chung

NATURE PROPOSES, ART DISPOSES:  
THE METAPHYSICAL LANDSCAPE OF LIU KUO-SUNG  
1992

Thirty years ago, dissatisfied with social isolation and cultural complacency in general and stagnation of the letters and the arts in particular, the impatient among the younger generation in Taiwan rebelled against the conventions and the taboos and, impetuous to resort to foreign influences, adopted headlong westernization. Natural as it was, the tendency was by no means insightful. Gradually, some among the group came to the realization that the filial son who remained at home might perhaps pass as a successor but showed no promise at all as a pioneer, that the prodigal son, already a follower in the Western steps, could not be expected to blaze trails at home, and that, in the long run, it was perhaps the returning prodigal who had any chance to regenerate the tradition. It was for the prodigal to come home, not to look for shelter, but to try to turn his pilgrimage experience to good account towards reviving his heritage. These returning prodigals gathered around the *Apollo Magazine* for friendly association and mutual support in writing. They were Yang Ying-feng, Hsu Ch'ang-hui, Liu Kuo-sung, and myself.

Our common aim in those days was to search for a broad way for the modernization of Chinese literature and arts. We found that, merely by resorting to archaism, one could not expect to revitalize tradition and that mere westernization could not assure modernization. Liu Kuo-sung reminded his friends in the westernization group that both the chase after the novel and the custody of the old could be traps. He said, "imitation of the novel is no improvement on imitation of the archaic, and to copy the foreign is no better than to copy the native." To this statement I fully agreed. Although his goal was modern Chinese painting and mine was modern Chinese poetry, both of us realized that what we were pursuing must be something at once national and contemporary. The filial son clung to the national at the expense of the contemporary while, on the contrary, the prodigal son merely followed the fashionable to the neglect of the traditional. Since we had appointed ourselves as homecoming prodigals, we could not afford to neglect either and were, therefore, confronted with the task of combining the Chinese with the Western and the traditional with the modern. Thirty years have been spent in pursuing this goal and, in retrospect, Liu Kuo-sung's indefatigable efforts have won universal recognition.

Liu Kuo-sung's long pilgrimage to modern Chinese painting, however arduous and eventful, has been inspiringly adventurous. Caught in the dilemma between tradition and foreign influence, he was wise enough to be carefully selective. Paying his homage to such masters as Cézanne and Matisse and savoring Abstract Expressionism, Op art, and Hard edge, he absorbed the spirit of abstractionism but gave up the medium of oil painting. After taking inventory of the treasure of Chinese tradition, he understood "brush and ink" in a new light and bade farewell to the dominant practice of "the upright brush-tip" and the stereotyped formation

of surface textures, to the shock of the art circles. The fact that Chinese painting originated from the same principles as calligraphy is characteristic of and conducive to Chinese painting, yet the repeated practice of "writing (instead of painting) a picture" through the centuries has resulted in narrowing the scope of handling dots and lines. At the same time, Liu was wise enough, however, to keep such traditional media as ink and cotton paper for the experiment of new techniques. By adopting the "wild-cursive" style of calligraphy he developed a new system of dynamic linear movements and, by plucking the intricate network of rough fibers from the paper after the picture was done, achieved wonderful effects of "flying white," when the dry brush branched off into swift parallel lines. He further enriched the texture of his painting by adopting collage from the West and by developing a great variety of surface-texture formation,

These, of course, were only technical resources, but without them it would be impossible for the artist to fully express his spirit and unique style. Such was the genius of Liu Kuo-sung that, awakened by the abstract art of the West, he succeeded in subtly transforming traditional Chinese landscape into something rhythmically more active, structurally more resourceful, and stylistically more unconventional. In spite of his own statement that he is an abstractionist in ink painting, Liu is not exactly an abstractionist. Coming all the way from his early apprenticeship through periods of ink-rubbing, fiber-plucking, space image, and water-rubbing, his style keeps changing, but the essential vision is never separable from the basic images of nature. The spectator may not be able to identify everything in the teasing ambiguities of his suggestive scenes, yet the feeling is unmistakable that he is looking at

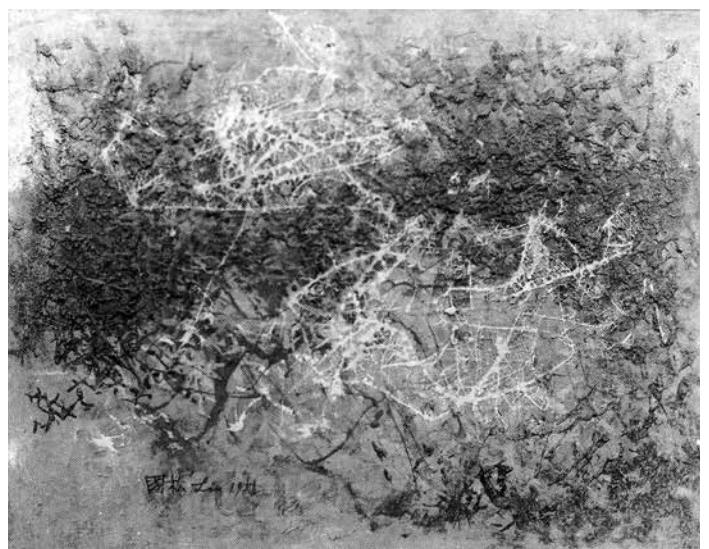


FIG 1 Liu Kuo-sung, *War*, 1958  
Oil on canvas, 14.96 x 18.11 in (38 x 46 cm)

something magnificent in nature, something that transcends reality through purification, with all irrelevances purged. Liu's landscape painting is remarkable for its success in extracting the essence, rather than copying the form, of nature. Thus I prefer to call his typical work "metaphysical landscape."

It has been customary for Liu's critics to analyze his technique, to quote his theory, or to study his art career by periods. These do not need my repetition. I am interested in exploring certain aspects of his art where he is most original but little examined.

Since Liu Kuo-sung decided to give up "the upright brush-tip" and conventional textural formations, it was imperative for him to establish an individual system of suggesting surface-texture. This he accomplished in an amazing variety of technical brilliance ranging from ink and water rubbing, collage, paper-crumping, and fiber-plucking to every imaginable way of gaining textural effects including such methods as "fish bone," "snake scale," "broken stone," and "drifting sand." The result is an intricate tapestry interwoven in black, white, and gray, which breaks up the limitation of "the upright brush-tip" contour. Indeed, the feeling is comparable to a chromatic trio where the white is not at all the least touching in the pattern it weaves in and out of black and gray. On the other hand, gray, usually the color of hopelessness, comes in his painting in subtle gradations from light to heavy and, achieving the effects of impalpability, tenderness, and mystery, tones down the black-white contrast. Furthermore, independent of the dominant contour of the upright brush, he combines the wildly cursive, calligraphic style of Shih Ke and Kline's broad sweeping strokes into a dynamic mechanism of powerfully rhythmic lines that whirl, rise, and stretch in spite of tremendous pressure, thus symbolic of the ever changing and renewing force of nature. On closer study, these thick and vigorous lines, so impressive in their endless undulations, also reveal gradations. Liu Kuo-sung is indeed a master of textural variety in ink painting.

In a typical Western landscape painting, a horizon often cuts the picture into the upper and the lower parts. In a classical Chinese landscape painting, where peaks rise one above the other and water stretches indefinitely to the distance as winding river or lake, this demarcation is so indifferent that the water meets the land at some obtuse angle and distant peaks often seem to lean slightly over to the spectator, which results in a bifocal, even multifocal perspective. Accordingly, the imaginary spectator of a Chinese landscape is placed on a standpoint slightly above the ground level. It may be a pavilion or a tower, if he is a scholar, or some mound, if he is a hermit. Anyway, the lording peaks are to be viewed at an imposing angle of elevation. Whether they rise in the monumental landscape of Ching Hao, Fan Kuan, or Shen Chou, the feeling is an overwhelming presence of grandeur. This mountain worship has been traditional in the structure of Chinese landscape painting.

The metaphysical landscape of Liu Kuo-sung, however, lifts its spectator way above the scholar and the hermit so that he is on the same level as the peaks themselves, and often even higher and still higher up so that he has to look downward at the scene. The peaks used to tower close to the top of a traditional landscape painting; very seldom, if at all, did they drop below the middle line. But in Liu's landscape they often appear about the middle of the picture and sometimes much lower. Elevated to such heights, the spectator, no longer down there upon the ground, seems to "tread the air and ride the wind;" he is no longer a hermit but an immortal. It is interesting to observe that, though in a classical landscape painting the hermit worships the cloudy peaks from far below, in

classical landscape poetry the poet is able to overcome gravity and, roaming carefree, enjoy communion with the Creator. It is also interesting to observe that Liu's painting is akin more to classical landscape poetry, a genre which includes poems descriptive of the poet's imaginary travel with the immortals. Take, for example, lines from Li Po:

What a spectacle on top of the world!  
The great river moves looming out of sight;  
For miles and miles stretch yellow clouds, wind-swept,  
With nine streams of white down the snowy peaks.<sup>2</sup>

Doesn't the scene remind us of Liu Kuo-sung at his most typical? The last line, in particular, is most expressive of the effects made by fiber-plucking on his cotton paper. According to his own description, Liu enjoys snowy mountains and was once ecstatic on the Alps. This side of his love for nature was manifest, when twenty years ago we drove up the Rocky Mountains for the snowy scene with Yang Shih-p'eng. Naturally, his ink landscape, particularly those of black-white contrast, is often reminiscent of snowy peaks seen not from below but from above. On the other hand, each time I flew over the snows of Switzerland, I was overwhelmed by the illusion of hovering over Liu's painting.

The ancients painted overhanging mountains seen from below because that was the only way to see them. Downward views from the airplane and farther, more fantastic views from the satellite and the rocket have widened the scope and enriched the variety of visual experiences of the moderns. Understandably, while artists of the so-called "national school of painting," who continue to view nature as it was viewed by the ancients, strand themselves on archaism, it is Liu Kuo-sung's aerial vision that has caught the spirit of contemporary visual experience. The entrance into the space age found his landscape—or, shall I say, space-scape—bold and vivid with the magnified lunar presence over the stormy arc-contour of the earth, the proportion between which is more metaphysical than astronomical. Thus the painter gave his spectator a further lift until he was all naked to the universe, a being somewhere between god and astronaut. Meantime, the painter himself has also become an inspired mediator between the human and the divine. We are reminded by many of his "space-scapes" of lines from Su Shih:

How I lament the fleeting span of my life  
And envy the endlessness of the Long River!  
How I wish to travel free with gods in flight  
And hold the moon in my arms forever and ever!

It is the irony of Liu's art that, while he turns disloyal to classical painters, he should profess unintended allegiance to classical poets. Provoked by the former but inspired by the latter, Liu Kuo-sung is indeed a true heir to the Chinese cultural tradition. In his college days, he had flirted with the poetic muse before he turned seriously to painting, but the poet in him recurs in the highly imaginative titles he gives his own works.

As early as 1964, I wrote of his art: "Liu Kuosung's life keeps flowing—it goes on and on in endless renewal, timeless and infinite. Limited is the picture within the frame, but the feeling it gives the spectator reaches far beyond, for it's the feeling of the water and the cloud and the wind, the longing of the finite for the infinite, and of the fleeting for the eternal."

I reiterated my point in 1973: "Whirling round and round in his picture is a force that ever regenerates and reincarnates itself,

inexhaustible in its circulation throughout the void of the cosmos. It is this endless force that ever appeals to us. The spiral of this rhythmic movement, at once vigorous and spontaneous, is suggestive of the undulation of dragons or the expansion of clouds, the rise of mountains or the press of currents. His picture looks at once self-sufficient and incomplete because the vigor of its motion seems insatiable and threatens to break through the frame. The drama of his rhythmic movement lies in its display of the essence of Change."

It was towards the end of his "Space" period that I said this. After the passage of twenty years, these observations of mine, even in retrospect in his post-Space period, remains my conclusion on his lifelong career as an artist. It is true that over the past two decades he has widened his chromatic range, lessened the blank space left unpainted, relaxed his rhythmic in tensity, and enriched his textural effects, yet in the powerful momentum of his early dash and the resourcefulness of his later innovations, the essence of his art remains unchanged. *Four Seasons Handscroll* of 1983 is a horizontal recapitulation of his pilgrimage through landscape, while *Source* of 1989 sums up his adventure for an outlet in vertical grandeur. Both works should be viewed as celebrations of his rich harvest over the decades. However, [*Scenery of Hong Kong*] of 1987 is imperiled, in its limitation of geographic reference, by the realism he has so carefully refrained from, and falls short of his acquired freedom. Against this peril I must strongly caution the artist because the distinction of his art rests on a delicate equilibrium between the alike and the unlike, the dynamic and the tranquil, the changing and the timeless. In masterpiece after assuring masterpiece, he has proved himself superb in achieving harmony out of contradictions. I wish that Liu Kuo-sung, undoubtedly a great painter of China in the latter half of the present century, could keep this hard-won equilibrium and maintain his artistic integrity in spite of social pressure.

This article was previously published in the exhibition catalogue *Liu Kuosung liushi huiguzhan* (The Retrospective of 60-Year-Old Liu Kuo-sung) (Taichung: Taiwan Museum of Art, 1992), 19-22.

## Notes

- 1 [Liu Kuo-sung, "Wo de sixiang licheng" (My Intellectual Journey), *Xiandai meishu* (Journal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum) 29 (April 1990): 16-23. *Apollo* is the English name of *Wenxing*.]
- 2 Li Po [Li Bai], "A Song of Lu Shan to Deputy Censor Lu Hsu-chou" [Lushan yao ji Lu Shiyu Xuzhou].
- 3 For Liu's statement see ["My Intellectual Journey"]. For our excursion on the Rockies see Yu Kwang-chung, "Denver-Border Pass of the New West" [Danfocheng—xin xiuy de yangguang] (Taipei: Chun wenxue chubanshe [Pure Literature Press], 1972). [Yang Shih-p'eng, to whom Yu Kwang-chung refers in this passage, is Daniel S.P. Yang (Yang Shipeng), also from Taiwan, who at the time was professor in the Theater Department at the University of Colorado Boulder.]
- 4 The astronaut may pass as an angel for his entrance into the realm of the divine.
- 5 Su Shih [Su Shi], "The Red Cliff II." [sic. These lines are from Su Shi's *First Ode on the Red Cliff* and not from the *Second Ode* as Yu suggests.]
- 6 [Yu Kwang-chung, "Weida de qianxi" (The Eve of Greatness), in his *Xiaoyaoyou* (The Untrammeled Traveler), Renjian congshu series (Taipei: Shibao chuban gongsi, 1984).]
- 7 [Yu Kwang-chung, "Yunkai jianyue: Chulun Liu Guosong de yishu" (The Clouds Disperse to Reveal the Moon: A Preliminary Study of Liu Guosong's Art) (Taipei: Chun wenxue chuban she, 1974). Republished in *Yu Guangzhong sanwen xuan* (Selected Prose Essays by Yu Kwang-chung) (Hong Kong: Wenhua shenghuo chuban she, 1975), 153-166.]

**Wu Guanzhong**

**UNIQUE, DREAM-LIKE, METAPHORIC:  
ON LIU KUO-SUNG'S RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION**

1992

IT'S BEEN TEN YEARS since I met Mr. Liu Kuo-sung and got to know his art. We should have known each other much sooner. A small Strait has separated people like us who pursue the same objective. It is most unfortunate. At the time when some young artists in Taiwan organized the Fifth Moon Group as a bastion to fight against the restrictions of traditional Chinese painting. I was being criticized on mainland China under the "crimes" of advocating abstract art and building a fortress of formalism. Tradition, to me, is the continuation and culmination of the unceasing activities of anti-tradition, anti-anti-tradition, and anti-anti-anti-tradition, Emperor Qin Shih-huang, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, conquered and united the whole of China, but soon afterwards his despotic rule of the country caused rebellions all over the nation. The rebel forces all had their selfish reasons, and there were various kinds of in-fights among them, but under the same objective of overthrowing the despotic Qin empire they had to unite first. The "rebels" soon established the Han dynasty and became the "rightful sovereign," only to be overthrown again by later rebellious forces.

The development of painting traditions was along the same line and the same principles. In ancient times the "rebel forces" among artists couldn't communicate easily and frequently due to poor transportation and communication systems. Today the world is much smaller; it is much easier to have scholarly exchanges and arguments among artists and scholars. But even under this much more favorable condition I still can't attend Liu Kuo-sung's retrospective exhibition. This preface is therefore my gesture of friendship for this auspicious occasion.

On reexamining this volume of Liu Kuo-sung's paintings, my general impression can be summarized in three adjectives: Unique, Dream-like, and Metamorphic. I find his paintings still, yet moving; changeable, yet simple; heavy, yet light. Paintings with such qualities are hard to find; I wonder who else can create the same.

A child takes delight not in being spoiled but in the fact that he is constantly discovering something new. It is most boring to see things which are clichéd. One admirable quality in some adults is that they have the heart of a child. This "child's heart" helps greatly in one's artistic quest and creation. "Creating something out of nothing" is not really a flattering expression for an artist; and this notion is not absolutely true. Ten months' pregnancy is not without its original cause. The unique, dream-like, and metamorphic qualities in Liu Kuo-sung's painting have derived from his feelings and inspirations, which were in turn impregnated directly or indirectly from his life experiences. But he was so attracted and bedazzled by these feelings and inspirations that he pursued them whole-heartedly without any concern about the price he was going to pay. Many people have given up their lives for love, many others have sacrificed their lives and worldly possessions for art; Liu Kuo-sung must belong to this camp of sacrifice-makers.

A good Chinese artist must study Chinese painting—its techniques which have become set patterns, its spirit which depicts true objects in a suggestive manner.... He must also study Western painting—its heavy demand on technical training, its compositional elements of mass, line, dot, etc., and its unique concept of treating color layers which are at once diluted and concentrated.... It is hard enough to inherit one tradition—be it Western or Eastern; inheriting both traditions, alas, is doubly strenuous. Actually, preserving one's inheritance dutifully is but an act of a prodigal son, because the inheritance is going to be squandered away sooner or later. A worthy son ought to amass his own wealth. The status quo of Chinese art is like a declining noble household. Chinese people, artists included, are being treated with contempt and prejudice of various degrees in today's world. This contempt and prejudice are also reflected in the appraisal of the Chinese cultural heritage; the great artistic achievements of our ancestors are being slighted, neglected, or misunderstood. This we can see and sense in the Chinese exhibitions of major Western museums and from the commentaries of people attending such exhibitions. It makes us feel sad to witness such indifference and ignorance.

But we shouldn't just laugh at the ignorance of others. There are just too few qualified "translators" bridging the gap between ancient Chinese and modern Westerners. Let us create some exciting modern Chinese painting which, without "translation," can amaze and delight viewers. This is the common wish of modern Chinese artists. Liu Kuo-sung and his colleagues have made some revolutionary efforts on the island of Taiwan to cultivate a new field for their works of art. Their battle cries should be heard by Chinese people in every corner of the world, and their worthy points should be echoed by Chinese artists across the land.

I have not read the statement of aims of the "Fifth Moon Group," but from the paintings of Liu Kuo-sung I seem to hear such battle cries. He has learned techniques from Western painting, and he has inherited the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. To express his feelings he has adopted a wide variety of means and techniques, such as floating the ink on the surface of the paper, and pulling out the coarse fibers of the paper to create special effects that are now closely associated with his style of painting. Liu Kuo-sung once talked about the fact that ancient Chinese artists often marked on their paintings that this painting was "made" by so and so. To me this word "made" shouldn't be interpreted in the negative sense. I would prefer to judge the effort that went into a specific painting, be it "made" or "painted." One of Mr. Liu's major experiments is to create striking textural effects working with traditional Chinese paper, and he has apparently succeeded. Artistic effects should have no national boundaries; I would shout "Hurrah!" to any workable effect.

"To appreciate the view of a thousand square miles/Climb yet another story of the tower." This traditional view as illustrated in

these two lines of a famous Chinese poem is no longer applicable to visual artists of today. As the sciences progress, people of our time are discovering ever more secrets of the universe through space travel and other scientific research projects on this planet. Liu Kuo-sung was apparently affected by such new scientific quests. His series of paintings relating to space travel are so unique, ambitious, and breath-taking that it seems that Mr. Liu wishes to "match the height [of his subject matter] with Heaven"—as a line of a famous Chinese poem goes. Yet art and artists are basically earth-bound; Liu Kuo-sung the artist is still attracted by his homeland after years of fascinations with objects of inner and outer space. Once he was almost killed in an accident travelling deep into the Three Gorges. I suppose the sights and seasons of his homeland, even when nowadays some of them are half in ruins, are still a major part of Mr. Liu's ever-beautiful dreams.

I once visited a wine factory at the famous Apricot Blossom Village in China, and another one in an old castle in San Francisco. On both occasions I was invited to taste the wines. There were so many brands of wine of different vintages that I got drunk after just sipping lightly at each. The winemakers were overjoyed to see this drunken but happy visitor. This retrospective exhibition must have many brands of excellent wines of different vintages made by Liu Kuo-sung. Although I shall miss the opportunity to taste these wines, I will imagine the delight and frustrations of Liu the winemaker as he anticipates the reactions of the wine-tasters. Why frustrations? No winemaker has not been frustrated with his product, and there is not a single TRUE winemaker who has not experienced failures and pitfalls. Since this is a retrospective exhibition, it must have the best representative wines and vintages on display. It must also demonstrate the creative process of wine-making—both the successes and the failures. I hope it will also display the "yeast"—the ingredient that can inspire the younger generation of painters in their making of new wines. This suddenly has brought to my mind the famous Beijing opera actress Guan Sushuang, who died suddenly at night. When she was discovered early the next morning, she was still wearing her exercise clothes, and her body was found to be covered with [purple] bruises resulting from her strenuous training.

Every Chinese artist, whether living in China or abroad, whether old or young, realizes the present status of modern Chinese painting in the international art arena. The glories of our ancestors are no longer with us, and we are only at the starting point of international recognition. The slogans of gaining international recognition are but empty words. "Know thy enemy and know thyself": this is a famous line from the ancient Chinese book of military strategy written by Master Sun. The unfortunate situation in contemporary Chinese art circles is that in the process of "knowing the enemy" Chinese artists may not necessarily have learned the strengths of others, while at the same they have often neglected the strengths of our own traditions. It is not easy to "know thy enemy", but it is equally hard to "know thyself." The Chinese people are known for their humbleness. There is a saying: "Be aware of one's limitations." This is to teach people to be humble, but humbleness and self-confidence are two different matters. Liu Kuo-sung has made great efforts in past decades to revolutionize Chinese painting. The process of this revolution and his achievements have given us confidence as well as concrete examples of "knowing thyself."

It is my hope that contemporary Chinese painting of the highest quality will sprout forth in every corner of the international art arena—like fresh bamboo shoots after a heavy rain.



**FIG 1** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Melon*, 1952  
Ink on paper  
22.44 × 13.78 in (57 × 35 cm)

This article was previously published in the exhibition catalogue *Liu Kuo-sung liushi huiguzhan* (The Retrospective of 60-Year-Old Liu Kuo-sung) (Taichung: Taiwan Museum of Art, 1992), 8-10. The original English translation, by Daniel S.P. Yang, is presented here in modified version.

David Teh-yu Wang

## THE DISK IN THE PAINTINGS OF LIU KUO-SUNG

1991

**THE SPACE PAINTING PERIOD** of Liu Kuo-sung lasted from late 1969 through 1972.<sup>1</sup> During this time, he turned out more than three hundred works depicting the eternal coexistence of the earth and the moon or the sun.<sup>2</sup> These paintings are strikingly innovative and bold; never have the sun and the moon been so conspicuously dominant, both in size and in position (Fig. 1). Yet traditional Chinese landscapes certainly portray the sun and the moon as part of a poetic scenery occupied by man. Liu previously had painted some landscapes featuring the moon; his *Autumn Moon* of 1968, created just before the advent of his Space Painting Period, exemplifies the moon in its traditional mode. The most prominent component of the paintings from Liu's Space Painting Period is the disk, the large and seemingly flat lunar or solar disk hovering in the upper center of the painting. The sharp contour of the disk achieved through collage is in stark contrast to the ragged terrains rendered in untrammeled brushstrokes or on a wrinkled paper. The asymmetric equilibrium and tension attained through the juxtaposition of these seemingly incongruous configurations within a rectangular format contribute most to the success of Liu's series.

### The Sources of the Disk

It has been maintained that, contrary to appearances, Liu's interest in the disk antedated man's first landing on the moon on July 21, 1969. Chu-tsing Li and Yu Kwang-chung point out that, as early as 1962, Liu had made two landscapes in a round format, one of which is *Ancient Landscape* (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> They also assert that the round format was inspired by fan paintings of the Song dynasty (960–1279). Given Liu's penchant for traditional Chinese landscape painting after 1961, their interpretation is justified.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the round fan has a functional nature that differs totally from that of a disk within a rectangular ground; the former has an external formal structure that avoids visible references to vertical and horizontal coordinates, while the latter stresses an interaction between the internal and external formal structures and refers to the coordinates of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> The free curvilinear forms of the fan in space should not be confused with the tension achieved by the circle confined by the square. Thus, it is improper to consider the round format from 1962 as anticipating the disk in the Space Painting Period. I propose that the round fan be excluded from our consideration of the disk.

Liu created other paintings in the round format in 1966–67 while visiting the United States on a grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Fund.<sup>6</sup> Although examples of these works are not available to me, I tend to believe that they were likely inspired by circles in geometric abstract art, which Liu must have seen during his visit to the U.S. Indeed, the tondo has always been one of the principal formats in Western painting.<sup>7</sup> The tondo used by Western abstract

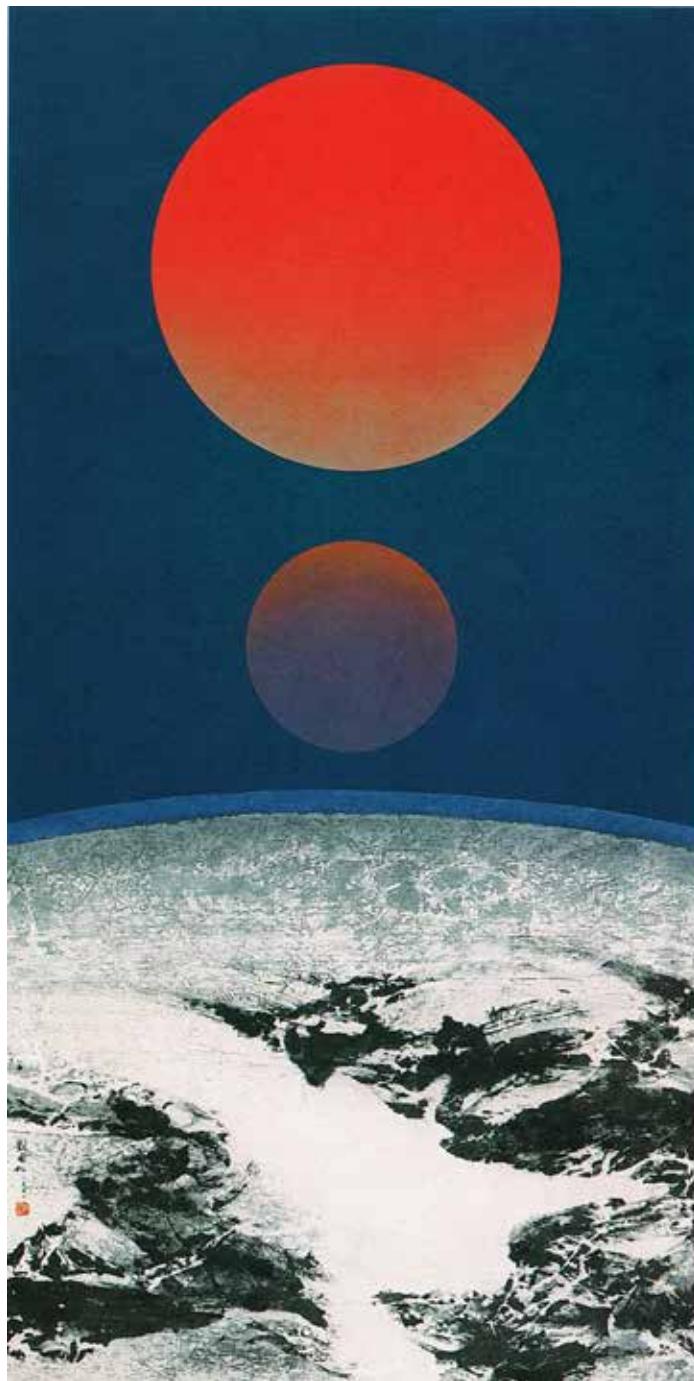
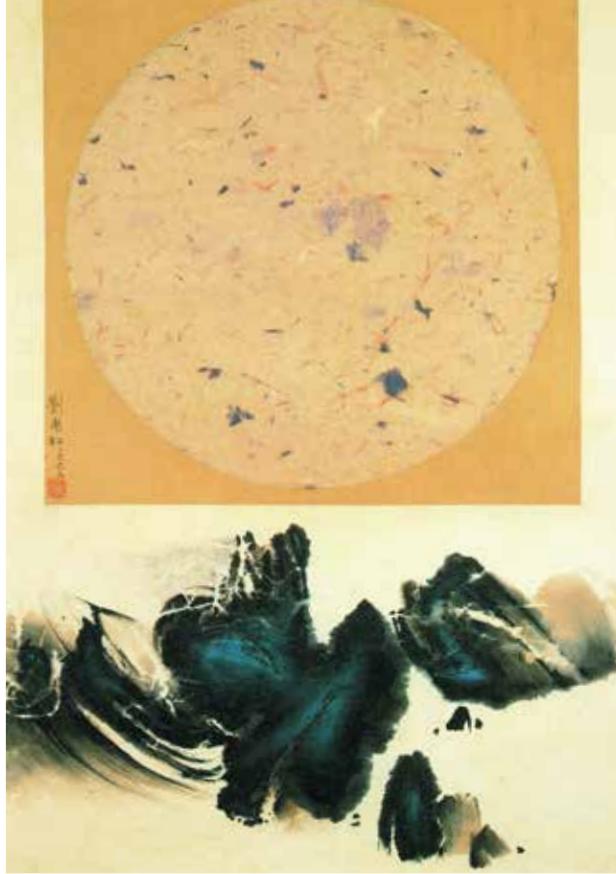


FIG 1 Liu Kuo-sung, *Sun's Metamorphosis No.1*, 1971  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 71.57 × 35.91 in (181.8 × 91.2 cm)



**FIG 2** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Ancient Landscape*, 1962  
Ink and color on paper  
20.87 × 20.87 in (53 × 53 cm)



**FIG 3** Liu Kuo-sung, *Lantern Festival*, 1969  
Ink and color with collage on paper, 32.09 × 22.83 in (81.5 × 58 cm)

painters shares with Chinese fan-shaped painting a functional nature that entirely differs from the painted and collaged disks in Liu's paintings. Liu's works in the circular format from his sojourn in America, whether or not inspired by geometric abstract painting, should not be regarded as direct predecessors of his painted and collaged disks. These painted disks can be examined from a broader perspective, and can be tied to Liu's relationship with Western art in general.

Liu himself has recollected that, inspired by the lanterns hung in the Lungshan Temple in Taipei, he painted a *Lantern Festival* early in 1969 (Fig. 3), in which a moon (or lantern) appears within a vermilion square above an abstract landscape, a dichotomous compositional device immediately anticipating the composition in the Space Painting series.<sup>8</sup> Also belonging to this category is *Mid-Autumn Festival* of the same year (Fig. 4). I have no intention to contest the fact that these paintings were made several months earlier than the moon landing. Nor do I wish to dispute the fact that the disks in *Lantern Festival* and *Mid-Autumn Festival* predated those of his Space Painting Period. What concerns me is the issue of originality specifically—whether the compositional device of dividing the ground into the upper and lower halves, each occupied by a different and dissimilar configuration, was an innovation on the part of Liu.

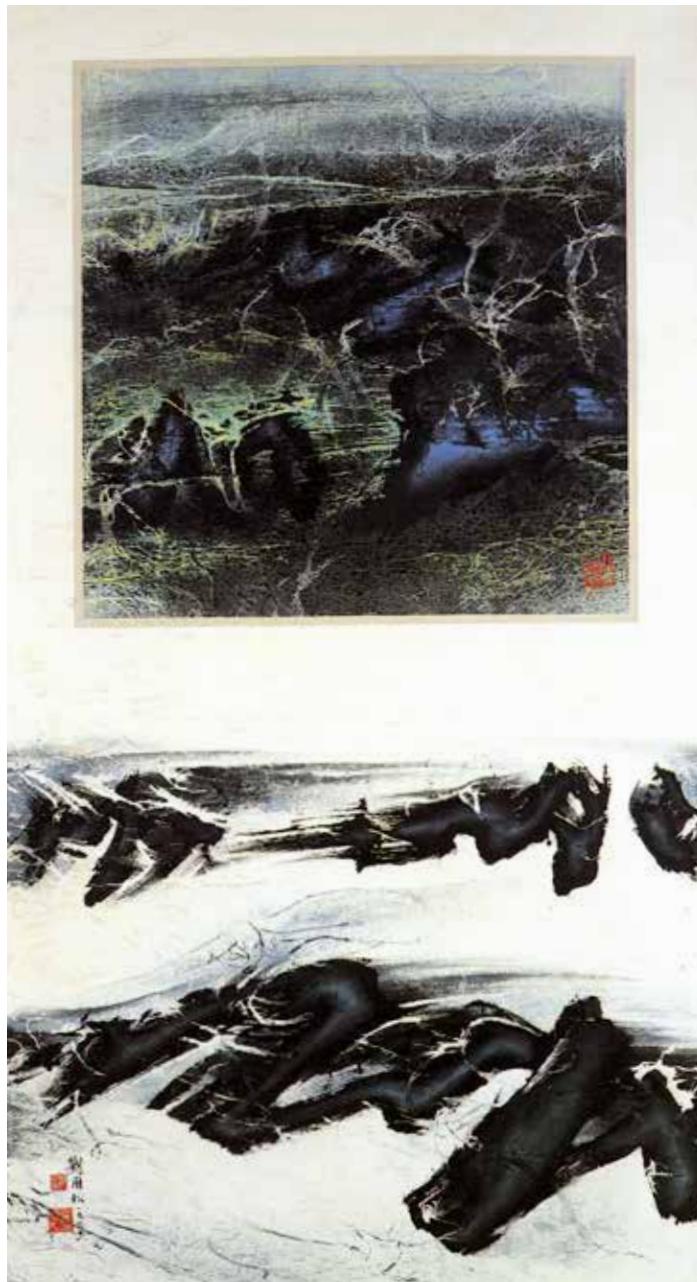
Liu certainly was familiar with contemporary Western art. The United States Information Agency (USIA) in Taipei, which Liu and others frequented, provided such periodicals as *Arts and Art News*. Liu's two-year visit to the United States and Europe enabled him to see still more contemporary works. However, Liu, as well as most art students in Taiwan, might have engaged contemporary



**FIG 4** Liu-Kuo-sung, *Mid-Autumn Festival*, 1969  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 45.67 × 30.32 in (116 × 77 cm)



**FIG 5** Liu Kuo-sung, *Loftiness No. 4*, 1966  
Ink and color with collage on paper, 49.02 x 28.74 in (124.5 x 73 cm)  
Private Collection



**FIG 6** Liu Kuo-sung, *Inside or Outside?*, 1967  
Ink and color with collage on paper, 55.31 x 29.33 in (140.5 x 74.5 cm)

Western art more for its visual than its intellectual content. Hindered by a language barrier and the scarcity of books about Western contemporary arts in Chinese, their ability to assimilate the form and image was much stronger than their capability to comprehend the ideological or theoretical issues essential to contemporary art. Structure and imagery had to have appealed to them most directly, and hence these aspects influenced them most profoundly. Thus, what they received from the West were visual influences rather than conceptual ones, an essential fact to remember when approaching all modern art movements in Taiwan.

Liu was familiar with Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Salvatore Dalí (1904–1989), Georges Braque (1882–1963), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Marc Chagall (1887–1985), Rouault (1871–1958), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and other well-known figures of the twentieth century, yet their works (certainly considered “modern” and almost

“contemporary” in Taiwan at the time) cannot have been related to Liu’s dichotomous compositional device.<sup>9</sup> Neither can such Abstract Expressionist masters as Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), to both of whom Liu often referred, have inspired such a compositional device, for Liu’s disks are foreign to their work. The geometry of the circle does appear in many of Constructivist and Suprematist abstractions of the early twentieth century, in works by such painters as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), El Lissitzky (1890–1941), and Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891–1956). Yet, because of the anti-Communist (and anti-Soviet) sociopolitical climate in Taiwan at the time, Liu would have been unlikely to have heard of their names, much less have seen their works. Accordingly, it is tempting to think that Liu originated the dichotomous compositional device.

Aspiring to attain international fame, Liu and others were ambitious to attend international exhibitions. Other participants in

these exhibitions must have attracted Liu's attention. Liu had in his possession a catalogue of the exhibition "The New American Painting," which travelled to eight European countries in 1958–59 and was sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art International Council, New York.<sup>10</sup> Liu would not have failed to notice Mark Rothko's works included in this catalogue.<sup>11</sup> Rothko liked to stack two horizontal rectangles of different colors in a vertical format. This format may have influenced Liu's works made during his sojourn in America and Europe, such as *Loftiness No. 4* of 1966 (Fig. 5) and *Inside or Outside?* of 1967 (Fig. 6). Liu may have proceeded to turn the upper square of this compositional format into a disk.

With these historical facts in mind, can we, then, accept Liu's own words at face value, and truly believe that the lantern enlightened him so dramatically that he changed the naturalistic moon in *Autumn Moon*, painted a mere several months earlier, into the geometric disk? If Liu's disk was indeed inspired by Chinese lanterns, why was it so flat, so geometric, and so incongruous with the bold calligraphic strokes below that were, to Chinese eyes, more Chinese?

A disk placed in a square is conscious of the geometry of the circle and the formal relationship between the border of the disk and that of the square. One wonders whether it was pure coincidence that Liu's configuration resembled so much the constructed paintings such as the target-themed paintings of Kenneth Noland (1924–2010) and Jasper Johns (1930–) (Fig. 7).<sup>12</sup> These works

emphasize the interplay between concentric circles and deliberately shaped margins.<sup>13</sup> Permit me to speculate that the anecdote of the lantern was Liu's justification for Sinicizing a Western compositional device.

From the disk within a square over a landscape, it took only "one small step" to arrive at Liu's standard composition: a disk hovering over a ragged landscape in the lower half of the painting. There is no doubt that the moon landing of 1969 thrust Liu towards a new subject, but is it true that Liu's standard compositional device in this era was also "out of the blue"? Like the dichotomous composition and the disk within a square, both influenced by geometric abstraction, the new compositional schema may well have been inspired by Adolph Gottlieb's (1903–1974) pictures, such as *Blast, I* of 1957 (Fig. 8). Liu must have seen this renowned work at the Museum of Modern Art when he visited New York. Gottlieb's *Burst* series itself echoed Rothko's vertical stacks of horizontal forms.<sup>14</sup> Liu was first influenced by Rothko and then by Gottlieb.

In the emblematic *Burst* series after the mid-1950s, Gottlieb devoted himself to the formal considerations of expressing the dynamics of universal opposites. In *Blast, I*, the squarish red disk hovers over the jagged black mass below, while the rest of the pictorial plane is an undifferentiated void. One cannot help wondering whether the resemblance between the red disk above the irregular brushstrokes and even the oblong vertical format of Liu's paintings and Gottlieb's is purely coincidental (Figs. 1, 8).



**FIG 7** Jasper Johns (b. 1930), *Target with Four Faces*, 1955

Encaustic on newspaper and cloth over canvas surmounted by four tinted-plaster faces in wood box with hinged front. Overall, with box open, 33½ × 26 × 3 in (85.3 × 66 × 7.6 cm); canvas 26 × 26 in (66 × 66 cm); box (closed) 3¾ × 26 × 3½ in (9.5 × 66 × 8.8 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Scull  
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY  
© 2021 Jasper Johns / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



**FIG 8** Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974), *Blast, I*, 1957

Oil on canvas, 7 ft 6 in × 45⅛ in (228.7 × 114.4 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Philip Johnson Fund.  
Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/  
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**FIG 9** Liu Kuo-sung, *Memories of Childhood A*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 28.15 x 23.62 in (71.5 x 60 cm)  
United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC), Taiwan

In a 1964 article on Robert Rauschenberg, Liu argued strongly against Rauschenberg's work and highly recommended Gottlieb's.<sup>15</sup> He mentioned that more than thirty of Gottlieb's works had been displayed at the 1963 Bienal de São Paulo. Liu also introduced the name of Gottlieb when discussing the 1958–59 exhibition *New American Painting*.<sup>16</sup> As an admirer of Gottlieb, Liu certainly would have seen his works in New York, where they were included in two group exhibitions in 1966 alone.<sup>17</sup> Liu's interest may even have extended to Gottlieb's works of the 1940s, such as *Nostalgia for Atlantis* of 1944.<sup>18</sup> Comparing this painting with Liu's *Memories of Childhood* (1957) (Fig. 9), one sees certain similarities in the general structure, as well as in the expression of emotional and psychological experience.

It is plausible that Liu's first effort in emulating Abstract Expressionist works in 1966 soon made him aware of the limitations of abstract brushstrokes. The compositional devices of geometric abstract art, especially those of Gottlieb, soon came to Liu's attention. I am inclined to believe that such compositional devices as seen in *Blast*, I provided an immediate impetus behind the standard composition of Liu's Space Paintings, and that the moon landing furnished him with a theme that substantiated his formal inclinations.

The collage technique that Liu adopted earlier in 1966 now perfectly suited his purpose of providing a sharp edge for the lunar and solar disks. Initially, Liu's disks were textured or painted. These variations soon gave way to an immaculate disk surface with only occasional tonal gradations. The seemingly flat disk is formally a more powerful image, and the light wash covering the remaining background helps to depict the vastness of space. In short, the abstractness and absoluteness of Gottlieb's work was transformed by Liu into illusionism.



**FIG 10** Robert Indiana, *The Demuth Five*, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 in (162.6 x 162.6 cm), diamond?  
Private collection. Photo: Courtesy of Kasmin Gallery, New York  
Artwork: © 2012 Morgan Art Foundation Ltd./Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



**FIG 11** Robert Indiana, *The Demuth American Dream No. 5*, 1963  
Oil on canvas, Five panels, overall: 144 x 144 in (365.8 x 365.8 cm),  
Each panel: 48 x 48 in (121.9 x 121.9 cm)  
Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift from the Women's Committee Fund, 1964  
Photo: Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto  
Artwork: © 2021 Morgan Art Foundation Ltd./Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

In the representational imagery of an eternal dichotomy and coexistence of the earth and the moon or the sun. Liu did not cease assimilating geometric abstract painting. For example, one cannot fail to notice the impact of Robert Indiana's *The Demuth Five* from 1963 (Fig. 10), which shares with Liu's works an interest in the relationship between the disk and the rhombic edge. Another example of Indiana's influence can be seen in the format of the five-panel structured painting: Indiana's *The Demuth American Dream No. 5* of 1963 (Fig. 11) and Liu's *A Moon for All Seasons*



**FIG 12** Liu Kuo-sung, *A Moon for All Seasons No. 3*, 1971  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 57.28 × 57.28 in (145.5 × 145.5 cm)

No. 3 of 1971 (Fig. 12). That both form a Greek cross of five panels and feature a central panel with a disk contained in a square cannot be explained by mere coincidence. Indiana's central panel, dedicated to Charles Demuth, is surrounded by "Eat," "Die," "Hug," and "Err," while Liu's moon is surrounded by "Spring," "Summer," "Autumn," and "Winter." Liu explained that such a format was inspired by the movies projected by four or five projectors simultaneously during his visit to Expo 67 in Montreal.<sup>19</sup> Liu's story about *Lantern Festival*, in my view, this appears to be another justification for his attempt of a format that is Western in origin. As a matter of fact, Liu must have seen Indiana's works in the American Pavilion in the Montreal Expo, where his *The Cardinal Numbers* was displayed prominently.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese painter certainly would not have failed to notice the Taiji (Supreme Ultimate) emblem in Alexander Liberman's works. Indeed, Liberman often referred to the *Book of Changes* in his series of circle paintings, which he named "Circism."<sup>21</sup> The surface is divided into two vertical halves, each dominated by a large circle, to be completed by a complementary dot. Derived

from the Taiji diagram, the diptych is conceived as two mirrored images in which yin and yang contrast with and complement each other. When Liberman's *Diptych—Two Ways*, also of 1950, is juxtaposed with Liu's *Positional Transformation of the Moon* of 1972, the compositional and conceptual similarity between them is self-evident. Note also that the way a smaller disk arrayed within a larger one bears some resemblance with Liberman's. Obviously, Liu's formal variations of the disk were inspired by Liberman's circle paintings.

One may raise the following question: since the Taiji emblem and the concepts of yin and yang as seen in Liberman's work are derived from China, how can we be certain that Liu received his impetus from Liberman, rather than from his own tradition? Indeed, Liu himself likes to talk about yin and yang, the Dao, Taiji, and other Chinese concepts and principles as the theoretical basis of his work. Even Liu's close supporter, Yu Kwang-chung, a man most unlikely to be associated with such antique ideas, felt comfortable using them to discuss the works of Liu and other members of the Fifth Moon Movement.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, considering



FIG 13 Liu Kuo-sung, *Corona*, 1972–89. Ink and color with collage on paper, 18.43 × 73.54 in (46.8 × 186.8 cm)



FIG 14 Liu Kuo-sung, *Yin and Yang No. 3*, 1973–89. Ink and acrylic on paper, 18.3 × 73.6 in (46.5 × 187 cm)

Liu's ardent interest in geometric abstraction, the formal interplay of disks in his works shows more impact from Liberman than from Chinese tradition. Liberman's influence is also discernible in Liu's work after his Space Painting Period. For example *Corona* of 1972–89 (Fig. 13) reminds us Liberman's *Sybil* of 1963, and *Yin and Yang No. 3* of 1973–89 (Fig. 14) shares a similar compositional concern with Liberman's *Omicron IV* of 1961. In addition, it is obvious that the shape of Liu's eclipse derives from that in Liberman's works, such as the *Duration* of 1953 (Fig. 15).

One may argue that Liu adapts the traditional Chinese format of multiple hanging scrolls, in which each unit is self-sufficient but complementary to the others when hung together. One such work is the seven-panel *Midnight Sun* of 1972 (Fig. 16). Although this format appears innocent of Western influence, one may only speculate about its relationship with Liberman's *Sixteen Ways* of 1951, a four-panel painting in the collection of Solomon R.

Guggenheim Museum, New York, that Liu must have seen during his stay in New York. Both works share an interest in using the individual panels to constitute a horizontal painting and, through interaction, to generate different permutations of the disk.<sup>23</sup> Besides, Gottlieb's pictures comprising several disks arrayed in a row might also play a role in inspiring Liu's multiple disks. Although Gottlieb did not use multiple panels to accommodate each one of these disks, the impression of this work is similar to that of Liu's *Midnight Sun*—disks of various sizes suspending above bold, irregular brushstrokes. Liu's sets of multiple hanging scrolls depicting disks, therefore, are amalgamations of a traditional painting format, Liberman's geometric disks in multiple panels, and Gottlieb's groups of variant disks.

Geometric abstract painting influenced not only Liu's disk in the rectangular ground, but also his use of brilliant colors—another important aspect of Liu's aesthetic that, due to the length of this

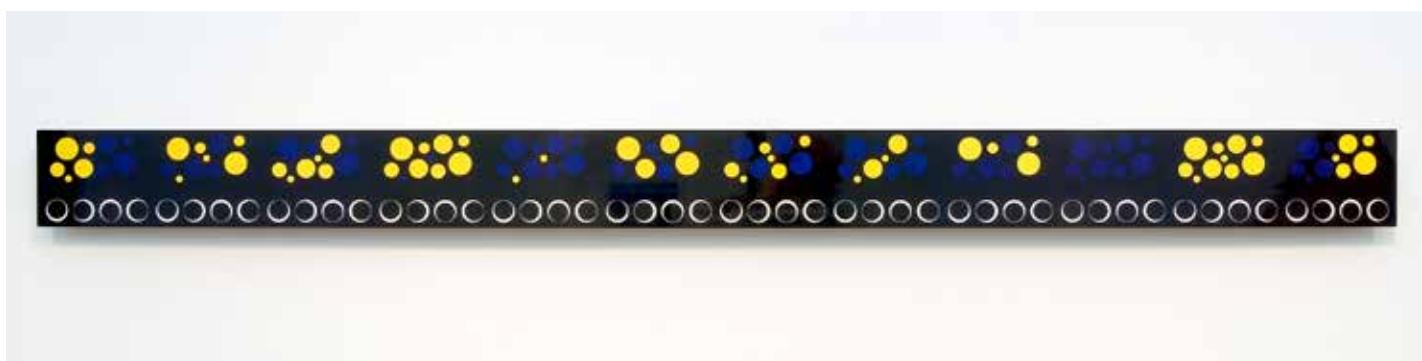


FIG 15 Alexander Liberman (1912–1999), *Duration*, 1953

Enamel on aluminum, 9½ × 132 in (24.1 × 335.3 cm)  
Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Museum purchase with the Helen and Everett H. Jones Purchase Fund (2006.41). McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX USA  
Photo credit © McNay Art Museum / Art Resource, NY

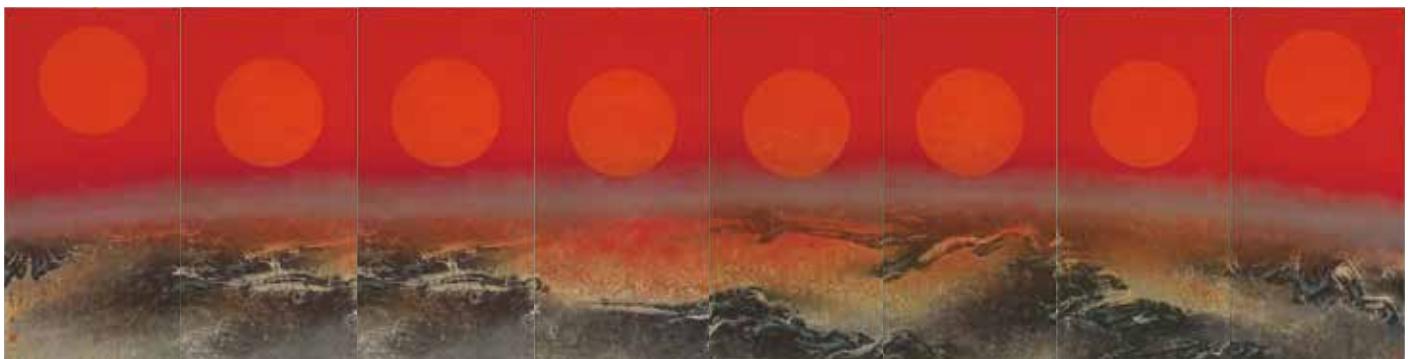


FIG 16 Liu Kuo-sung, *Midnight Sun*, 1972. Mixed media, 60.24 × 209.84 in (153 × 533 cm)  
Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong

paper, cannot be covered here. In his geometric abstract works, two incongruous configurations above and below present a formal dichotomy with an internal exclusiveness. However, once the representational subject matter—the lunar or solar disk—is imbued into the abstract structure, it becomes Chinese on philosophical and sentimental levels. The essence of such qualitative change can be approached variously, from, say, the aspect of degeneration or elevation. However, it is more plausible to interpret this change in terms of the indigenous Chinese philosophical concept of moderation. By and large, Liu's final solution is another instance of maintaining a balance between naturalism and abstraction long established in Chinese landscape painting.<sup>24</sup> The transformation of the geometric disk to a moon or sun involves not only aesthetic but also emotional and philosophical considerations, and should be evaluated accordingly at the outset.

### The Disk as a Celestial Body

The Chinese for long have had a special sentimental penchant for the sun and particularly for the moon. The sun and the moon possess significance that is sometimes mythical, as seen in the funeral banner from the Han-dynasty tombs of Mawangdui; sometimes iconographic, as seen in the depictions of the Water-Moon Guanyin; sometimes poetic, as is the case for nearly all traditional Chinese landscape paintings depicting the sun and the moon, including Liu's own *Autumn Moon* of 1968; and most frequently philosophical, in the sense of symbolizing historical continuity. The philosophical sun and moon, to the best of my knowledge, are not pictured in traditional Chinese paintings, but are best expressed perhaps in a renowned poem by Wang Changling (698–765) of the Tang dynasty (618–907):

Under the Qin moonlight  
and through the Han passes  
Mile after mile to battle they marched  
and never returned ...  
If only the "Flying General" of Dragon City  
were still among us,  
Never would the Tartar horsemen  
cross Yin mountain.<sup>25</sup>

Or, in the opening lyric poem in Luo Guanzhong's (ca. 1330–1400) *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*:

The Long River passes east away,  
Surge over surge  
White blooming waves sweep all heroes on.

As right and wrong, triumph and defeat all turn nil  
at the turn of the head.  
But ever the green hills stay  
How many times have they witnessed the red  
setting sun?<sup>26</sup>

This philosophically sentimental penchant for historic continuity did not end in the twentieth century, but indeed motivated the underlying dynamics of Liu's Space Paintings, notwithstanding the introduction of a scientifically modern perspective.

Permit me to turn to poets contemporary with Liu, who were among the ardent supporters of modern art, for a quick reference. There is no lack of such a philosophically sentimental inclination in their poems. For example, Lo Ch'ing (Luo Qing) composed many poems about the moon, such as "A Bee's Moon," "A Watch's Moon," "Driver A-Tu's Moon," "Moonlight upon My Bed," and "The Moon of March 29."<sup>27</sup> The philosophically historical predisposition in the latter is particularly strong, because March 29 was the date of the Revolution of 1911, in which seventy-two young men were martyred for the Republic of China. In the poem, the constant moon watched over a baby boy through his growth into a young man, his romance, and, finally, his bleeding to death from a bullet young at the young age of twenty-three.

Kuan Kuan (Guan Guan), a member of the Epoch Poetry Society, was actively involved with modern art movements of the time. In his poem "Square Moon," one may find some lines spiritually akin to Liu's *Metamorphosis of the Moon*: "I enquire of the moon: Since you can carve yourself into a crescent, how come you don't carve yourself into a square? Oh, ovals are out of fashion. Oh. Or carve a ring to give to my wife."<sup>28</sup> Liu answered Kuan Kuan's question about sculpting the moon; he manipulated the moon in ways more than imaginable by the poet. Consider also "Sky Meditation: Six Poems" by Wai-lim Yip, another member of the Epoch Poetry Society. The third poem in this cycle, entitled "Tou" ("penetration," "transparency"), almost reads as a verbal rendition of one of Liu's images: "Inside the moon, a mountain / Inside the mountain, the moon / Like a mountain / Like the moon / Mountain moon / Moon mountain / Breach / Break / Ignorant of blood."<sup>29</sup>

It is in respect to the philosophical yet sentimental sense of historical continuity that Liu's Space Paintings, in spite of their modernism, are to be placed within the greater tradition of Chinese landscape painting.

In the sense of historic continuity, the large disk hovering over the bird's-eye-view landscape in Liu's Space Paintings presents a dialogue between man and the moon or, at times, the sun. At one point, Liu tried to replicate the perspectives of photographs sent

back from outer space, placing the moon at the bottom and the earth hovering above in space, such as in the *Moon Walk* of 1969 (Fig. 17). The impression is inhumanly remote and detached, because the viewer feels a difficulty in positioning himself on the moon at the lower section. Those of us who have not travelled to space feel uncomfortable seeing our earth portrayed as a ball suspended in the void of the universe. By setting the earth at the lower edge of the composition and thus establishing the viewer's position, the artist avoids the sense of remote distance as shown in the satellite pictures. In addition, the abstract brushwork suggests the energetic activity on the earth. The lower sections of Liu's Space Paintings are thus human landscapes rather than sections of a barren and desolate celestial body. They present a spatial relationship within the realm of human logic.

Such a spatial relationship, nevertheless, is not a rational one, because the distance between the two celestial bodies is distorted by the greatly enlarged moon. (A comparable experience is seeing the moon through a zoom lens.) Liu neither intends to represent the spatial relationship between the celestial bodies with scientific precision nor with human logic. Paradoxically, it is exactly such irrationality that makes the spatial relationship human. That is, a strong subjectivity on the part of the artist and the viewer is required to rationalize the apparent irrationality. Paintings by Gottlieb, adduced above for comparison, show a similar irrational order (which is not necessarily disorder) in their configurations, but their spatial relationships are non-representational and thus involve little human logic.<sup>30</sup>

Within Liu's irrational order that requires subjective involvement, a strong internal tension is exhibited. In the representational mode, the lack of atmosphere on the moon helps to shape the flat, two-dimensional disk. Rudolf Arnheim maintains that the disk (or circle) is "the only figure that does not single out any particular direction,"<sup>31</sup> and the boundary of a two-dimensional disk "generates a family of constrictive vectors moving from the outside toward the center and counteracting the expansive vectors that emanate radially from the center."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the

two-dimensional disk generates centripetal counterpressure by its resistance to expansion, and creates a tension that helps produce a figure that rotates endlessly. An internal dynamics is thus formed by the disk alone. Moreover, Arnheim also holds that "the one-dimensional [sic.] rotational movement of the circle often symbolizes the time, whereas the two-dimensional [sic.] radial dynamics of the disk denotes spatial relationships, either actual or figurative."<sup>33</sup> What Arnheim means is that a flat disk incurs rotational movement in time, while a sphere incurs that motion in space.

Accordingly, Liu's disk, devoid of two-dimensionality, represents a celestial body rotating endlessly rather in time than in space. The element of time is further enhanced by the distorted, and therefore undermined, spatial relationship between the two celestial bodies. The seemingly static disk in Liu's painting is therefore more an image of everlasting motion from primordial time than a moon circulating around the earth in space. The sense of temporal continuity is greater than the sense of a definition of space at a specific moment. In some instances, the time sequence is further emphasized by a series of ghostly images, such as the *Impression of Sunset No. 6* of 1972 (Fig. 18). These paintings picture for the first time the sentimental sense of historic continuity expressed by the Ming poet Yang Shen (1488–1559): "But ever the green hills stay / How many times have they witnessed the red setting sun?"

The concept of cosmologically everlasting motion and change is indigenously Chinese. There is a long tradition in China that looks at the waning and waxing of the moon as a metaphor for the ephemerality and vicissitudes of human affairs. Upon seeing the pictures of our earth sent back from the moon, Liu began to reconsider this metaphor from a different perspective. The constant moon, although occasionally eclipsed, witnesses the vicissitudes of human affairs on earth, and hence the title of one of the series in his Space Paintings: *Which is Earth? (Diqu hexu)*.<sup>34</sup> The subject matter of *Which is Earth?* is not just the earth, sun, and moon as substantial entities, but the Chinese way of looking at human affairs as exemplified by Su Shi's (1037–1101) prose essay "The Red Cliff, I" (1082):



**FIG 17** Liu Kuo-sung, *Moon Walk*, 1969  
Ink and color on paper, 27.17 × 33.46 in (69 × 85 cm). Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan



FIG 18 Liu Kuo-sung, *Impression of Sunset No. 6*, 1972–89. Ink and acrylic on paper, 73.23 × 18.11 in (186 × 46 cm)

The one [i.e. water] streams past so swiftly yet is never gone; the other [i.e. the moon] for ever waxes and wanes yet finally has never grown nor diminished. For if you look at the aspect which changes, heaven and earth cannot last for one blink; but if you look at the aspect which is changeless, the worlds within and outside you are both inexhaustible, and what reasons have you to envy anything?<sup>35</sup>

May not this essay, which every Chinese student is required to memorize, underlie the eternal dialogue in *Which is Earth* series? The moon in Liu's paintings is then symbolic. A full moon symbolizes eternity, and the crescent stands for stages of the moon's cyclic return to fullness. It is not without significance that, although the eclipse may be represented in many steps in Liu's work, it is always accompanied by a full moon. Traditionally, the everlasting interplay of crescent moon and full moon is an embodiment of the cycle of eclipse-obscurity-decline and fullness-illumination-progress, which is in itself a manifestation of the concepts of yin and yang. Although the moon was depicted in traditional Chinese landscapes, Liu is the first Chinese painter to incorporate the eclipsed moon, which most clearly portrays the cycle discussed above.<sup>36</sup>

At this point, I would like to draw attention to the theory of empathy proposed by Wilhelm Worringer.<sup>37</sup> Empathy, in Worringer's framework, means the projection of the sense of life upon the artistic medium, but he also maintains that inorganic shapes are unsuitable for aesthetic empathy. If so, Liu's geometric disk is invulnerable to empathy. How does the beholder feel the subjective sentiments of historic continuity and cyclic return when viewing Liu's geometric disk? In a critical study of Worringer's concept of empathy, Arnheim provides an answer for us: "The narrow notion of empathy as the pleasure of finding the organic in the organic must be replaced with that of man's preeminent desire to contemplate a world in which he is at home because, with all its monsters and mysteries and its inanimate rocks and waters, it is of his own kind."<sup>38</sup> Contrary to what Worringer believes, empathy takes place not only in organic shapes but also in inorganic ones, so long as they arouse a desire for contemplation. Following this revised definition of empathy, it is understandable that, by contemplating human affairs on earth, the beholder is able to project his or her own viewpoints and emotions onto the lunar or solar disk.

The landscape below, rendered in semi-automatic strokes or rendered organic by the wrinkled paper, stands for constantly changing human affairs. Abstract brushwork is easily incorporated into the traditional Chinese idiom of calligraphic brushwork, as witnessed by the abstract paintings and the essays by Liu and other members of the Fifth Moon Group.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult, and pointless, to argue about whether Liu's brushwork is Chinese or Western. What concerns the present article is rather that Liu adapted the nature of this kind of brushwork for a representational purpose. It is also not without significance that the earth, though only partially shown, is provided with a variety of appearance. The lower section is full of movement which comes not only from the swift movement of the brush stroke itself, but also from the lack of geometric clarity.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the agitation and irregularity of the ragged brushwork and the undifferentiated configuration that it forms not only represent geographic terrains that are embodiments of terrestrial energy, but also symbolize the chaos and ephemerality of the human condition. The various modes of representation in the lower section of Liu's painting should not be

regarded as merely his effort to change within a repetitive compositional schema. Accordingly, the contrast between the earth and the moon / sun is twofold. The busyness (if not chaos) of the earth contrasts with the calmness (if not order) of the moon. Moreover, the inconstancy of the earth contrasts with the cyclic constancy of the moon. Because human affairs are not invertible, the cyclic constancy of the moon is enviable and yet unattainable. The *Which is Earth?* series thus presents a philosophical antagonism between order and complexity. Both the simple composition of a disk inside a rectangle, and a disk speaking for eternity, reflect the cosmological order.<sup>41</sup> As a contrast, the divergent and undemarcated landscape illustrates levels of complexity and subtlety. As order and complexity are antagonistic yet complementary to each other in art, so are they in Liu's work.<sup>42</sup>

It is generally agreed that the circle, or disk, is the first organized shape to emerge from the more or less uncontrolled scribbles of children. The origin of the circle has been interpreted variously, as best summarized by Arnheim:

It has been maintained that the child receives the inspiration for his earliest shapes from various round objects observed in the environment. The Freudian psychologist derives them from the mother's breasts, the Jungian from the mandala; others point to the sun and the moon.

These speculations are based on the conviction that every form quality of pictures must somehow be derived from observations in the physical world. Actually the fundamental tendency toward simplest shape in motor and visual behavior is quite sufficient to explain the priority of circular shapes. The circle is the simplest shape available in the pictorial medium because it is centrically symmetrical in all directions.<sup>43</sup>

No matter the motive for the circle or disk, it satisfies one of the basic functions of art: to seek for order in a seemingly chaotic nature which man observes.<sup>44</sup> The disk in Liu's series fulfills such a function. The central position of the disk further enhances its importance, because it is held that the middle position is the place of greatest importance in a painting, which gives a sense of permanence.<sup>45</sup> In painting, the central position is usually occupied by the god, the saint, the monarch, or signs that are of iconographic importance; they are supposed to be of permanent nature. The central position of the disk in Liu's painting thus makes the simplicity of the disk more complicated than it appears, and, psychologically, assists in conveying the constancy of the sun and the moon.

The vertical rectangle framing the composition further complicates the matter. There are expansive tensions directed toward the sides and corners of the rectangle, which help portray the pictorial

ground of Liu's works representationally—that is, the space the disk occupies is not restricted to the pictorial ground; it expands beyond the edges of the painting into the cosmic infinite. However, the edge of the painting, by virtue of its symmetry, also offers a kind of visual attention, which Armheim calls "an external center"; its stability holds the composition together from the outside, just as the middle supports it from the inside.<sup>47</sup> Through this double constraint, the expansive tensions are pulled back to the central disk, which helps to create an internal flow of life and maintain a dynamic equilibrium. The same happens in some of Liu's paintings made of several units, in which the vastness of the universe is represented not only in the multiplied volume but also in the multiplied internal dynamics.

So far we have seen in Liu's work all the three creative tendencies inherent in a work of art: (a) simplification, (b) balanced, regular, symmetrical patterns, and (c) an enriched structure.<sup>48</sup> The first two tendencies are closely related and exemplified by Liu's geometry of disk and the dichotomous composition. The tendency to the enriched structure, that is, the enrichment of the formal pattern, is manifested in Liu's permutations of the disk and ragged terrains.

## Conclusion

It is well known that Liu was influenced by Abstract Expressionist paintings in the 1950s. However, Liu's debt to geometric abstract painting is also evident: his dichotomous compositions can be traced to Rothko and particularly Gottlieb; his geometric shape, the disk, and its different permutations are inspired by Liberman, and to some extent also Gottlieb; and his use of rhombic shapes and various arrays of structured paintings are influenced by Indiana. In addition, Liu's view of the relationship between the earth, the sun, and the moon was drastically altered by the American moon landing. If Liu's Space Paintings were no more than reverberations of these Western sources, they would have little worth. But they are not. What makes his art unique is his ingenious way of incorporating Western geometric shapes, his choice of a new vantage point from which to view our earth, and his foundation in Chinese philosophical ideas about the sun and, particularly, the moon. This combination of diverse sources creates an art that is unconventional in form and yet traditional in spirit. In Liu's art, modern Western images are filtered through his traditional Chinese upbringing to make an entirely new statement.

This article was previously published in *Liu Guosong yanjiu wenxuan* [Selected Essays on Liu Kuo-sung], ed. Chun-yi Lee (Li Junyi) [Taipei: National Museum of History, 1996], 174-200.

## Notes

1 For discussions on Liu's artistic development in general, see Chu-tsing Li, *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist*, exh. cat. (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1966), which is revised in "The Confluence of Chinese and Western Art: The Artistic Growth of the Painter Liu Kuo-sung," in *Paintings by Liu Kuo-sung*, exh. cat. (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1990), 20-38 [reproduced in this Reader, 66-93.] (hereafter, Li, "Confluence"). See also Li, *Trends in Modern Chinese Painting: The C.A. Drenowatz Collection* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1979), 186-193.

2 Yip Wai-lim (Ye Weilian), *Yu dangtai yishujia de huihua: Zhongguo xiandaihua de chengzhang* [Dialogues with Contemporary Artists: The Growth of Modern Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1987), 271. Li, *The Growth of a Modern Artist*, 56.  
 3 Yu Kwang-chung, "Yunkai jianyue: Chulun Liu Kuo-sung de yishu" [The Clouds Disperse to Reveal the Moon: A Preliminary Study of Liu Kuo-sung's Art], first published in 1973, republished in *Yu Guangzhong Sanwen Xuan* [Prose Essays by Yu Kwang-chung] (Hong Kong: Wenhua shenghuo chuban she, 1975), 153-166.

- 4 This interest was initiated by Liu's encounter with classical masterpieces from the National Palace Museum collection, for the first time accessible to the Taiwan public in 1961. Liu was able to create some works that, both in the format and the use of ink, echoed the spirit of traditional Chinese landscape paintings—notwithstanding his use of canvas treated with gypsum. Liu mentioned late in this year that, through this exposure to ancient masterpieces, "painters are able to learn new things from the old, and to make introspections that will be of help in their creations in the future." See Liu, "Linmo, xiesheng, chuangzao" [Copying, Sketching, Creating], originally published in November 1961, republished in his book of the same title (Taipei: Wenxing shuju, 1966), 117-121.
- 5 For a detailed discussion on the formal structure of the tondo and square, see Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 115-152.
- 6 Li, "Confluence," 30.
- 7 William Zimmer, "The Tondo," *Art Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 60-3. Zimmer states that the tondo format came into being in fifteenth-century Dutch painting, but does not take into account tondi on ancient Greek cups and coins.
- 8 Li, "Confluence," 32.
- 9 Zhu Chendong, "Huajia Liu Guosong fangwen ji" [An account of visiting the painter Liu Kuo-sung], in his *Huihua zhaji* [Notes on Painting] (Kaohsiung: Guangming chuban she, 1972), 144-150.
- 10 Liu, "Xin Dada-pai huajia Luosenbo: Huo Weinisi shuangnianzhan huihua dajiang" [New Dada Painter Rauschenberg: Receiving the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale], originally published in *Wenxing (Apollo)* 83 (1964), reprinted in *Linmo, xiesheng, chuangzao*, 157-165, esp. 158.
- 11 Mark Rothko, exh. cat. (Venice: Museo d'Arte Moderna ca' Pesaro, 1970).
- 12 Their series are mentioned, for example, in Liu's *Linmo, xiesheng, chuangzao*, 151, 159.
- 13 Marjorie Welish, "When Is a Door Not a Door?" *Art Journal* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 48-51.
- 14 Lawrence Alloway, "Adolph Gottlieb and Abstract Painting," in Lawrence Alloway and Mary Davis MacNaughton, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: The Arts Publisher, Inc., in association with the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, Inc., 1981), 54-62. This catalogue provides a rather comprehensive bibliography.
- 15 See note 10 above.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 "Seven Decades 1895-1965: Crosscurrents in Modern Art" at the Public Education Association, New York, April 26-May 21; "Art of the United States 1670-1966" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, September 28-November 27. Robert Doty and Diane Waldman, *Adolph Gottlieb*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1968), 115.
- 18 For Gottlieb's work in this decade, see Stephen Polcari, "Adolph Gottlieb's Allegorical Epic of World War II," in *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 202-207.
- 19 Li, "Confluence," 33.
- 20 Included in the exhibition entitled *American Painting Now* in Expo 67. Carl J. Weinhardt, Jr. ed., *Robert Indiana* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), 226.
- 21 The most comprehensive book on this artist, to the best of my knowledge, is Barbara Rose, *Alexander Liberman* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), in which there is a complete bibliography compiled by Cynthia Goodman. Rose relates Liberman's circle to Pythagorean circle symbolism and the neo-Platonic conception of the circle as a sign of the Infinite (58), and gestalt-psychology principles as a systematic aesthetic theory (91-92). In his statement "Circism" of 1960, Liberman acknowledged his debt to Hegel and to dialectical thought in general. The relationship of the circular figure to its surrounding field was a deliberate polarity, a ying [sic]-yang construction of reversible positive and negative forms" (92-93).
- 22 Yu, "Cong lingshi zhuyi chufa" [To set out from Clairvoyancy], originally published in *Wenxing* 80 (1964): 48-52, and republished his *Xiaoyaoyou* [The Untrammeled Traveler] (Taipei: Book World Co., 1965), 107-119. [An English translation of this essay, entitled "On from Clairvoyancy," is reproduced in this Reader, 53-55.]
- 23 For Liberman's interest in this aspect, see Rose, op. cit., p.57.
- 24 Note that Chinese landscape painting has already reached the stage of simplicity and abstractness in the Chan paintings of the thirteenth century, such as the works by Yujian (fl. ca. 1250). It would of great interest if some of Liu's works, such as the aforementioned *Autumn Moon* of 1968, can be compared with Yujian's paintings.
- 25 Slightly modified from the translation by Innes Berdan, *The Three Hundred T'ang Poems*, 4th ed. (Taipei: The Far East Book Co. Ltd., 1984), 468.
- 26 Modified from the translation by Moss Roberts, *Three Kingdoms: Chinese Epic Drama* (New York: Pantheon Book, 1976), 3. This lyric poem is not given in the most complete translation by C.H. Brewitt-Taylor, *San Kuo, or Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, 2 vols. (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1925).
- 27 Chi Pang-yuan, et al. (eds.), *An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Literature, Taiwan: 1949-1974*, vol. 1 (Taipei: National Institute for Compilation and Translation, 1975), 312-316.
- 28 Translated by Jeanne Larsen, *ibid.*, 121-122.
- 29 Translated by Yip Wai-lim, *ibid.*, 241.
- 30 For the definitions of the irrationality, the disorder, and the rationality with regard to the spatial relationship, see Rudolf Arnheim, "Order and Complexity in Landscape Design," in his collected essays *Toward a Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 123-135. The following analysis of Liu's disk refers heavily to gestalt psychology. I am fully aware of the shortcomings of the simplicity principle of gestalt theory, which can be shown by a quick reference to a statement by Paul Z. Hartal: "The simplicity principle does not always work in a consistent manner. In the context of a painting, a daub of paint next to a group of horses, for instance, might be interpreted by the spectator as another horse, whereas next to a group of trees it might be perceived, perhaps, as another tree ... What Arnheim fails to see, however, is the fact that art cannot be separated from its cultural context ... Since gestalt psychology views perception as a process in which inference is guided by the simplicity principle, and not by the complex levels of acquired knowledge, it is unable to cope with the intricate ramifications stemming from the lattice of quibbling and of visual ambiguity ..." See Hartal, *The Brush and the Compass: The Interface Dynamics of Art and Science* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1988), 104-108. Even so, there are two reasons for me to approach Liu's paintings from gestalt theory: (1) Liu's paintings are mostly simple in structure, which makes it possible to approach them from this theory; (2) Liu receives substantial influence from Liberman, and the latter consciously applies gestalt theory to his aesthetic theory (see n. 19 above).
- For a good survey of psychoanalytic research in art history, see Jack Spector, "The State of Psychoanalytic Research in Art History," *Art Bulletin* 70, no. 1 (March 1988): 49-76. Also noteworthy is the book review by Bradley Collins, a doctoral candidate at Columbia University who is writing a dissertation on "Psychoanalytic Biography and Art History," "Psychoanalysis and Art History," *Art Journal* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 182-186. (see note 19 above).
- 31 Arnheim, "Perceptual Analysis of a Symbol of Interaction," in his *Toward a Psychology of Art*, 222-244, esp. 234.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 234-235.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 This title was improperly translated by Chu-tsing Li as *Which is Earth?* Such a rendition makes this series rather childish and superficial. [The author's preferred English title for the series is *The Earth: Time and Again*. For consistency, *Which is Earth?* is used throughout this Reader.]
- 35 "The Red Cliff, I," Translated by A.C. Graham, in *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, ed. Cyril Birch (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), 381-382.
- 36 In the favor of circle and sphere of cosmological shapes and actions, the eclipse, as a distorted circle, appears late in Western art, not until Antonio Allegri Correggio (ca. 1489-1534). See Erwin Panofsky, "Galileo as a Critic of the Arts: Aesthetic Attitude and Scientific Thought," *Isis* 47, no. 1 (March 1956): 12.
- 37 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953).
- 38 Arnheim, "Wilhelm Worringer on Abstraction and Empathy," in his *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 50-62, esp. 60.
- 39 Liu and Chuang Che wrote many articles to promote and interpret the relationship between the Chinese calligraphic strokes and the biomorphic figurations in abstract painting, which I have no intention to explore in this study. See Liu, *Zhongguo xiandai hua de lu* [The Path of Modern Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Book World Co., 1965) and *Linmo, xiesheng, chuangzao; Chuang Che, Xiandai huihua sanlun* [Three Essays on Modern Painting] (Taipei: Book World Co., 1966).
- 40 It has been maintained that "the understanding of movement depends on the clarity of meaning but the impression of movement can be enhanced by lack of geometrical clarity." E. H. Gombrich, "Moment and Movement in Art," in his *The Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 40-62, esp. 58.
- 41 For the cosmological shapes and actions, see Arnheim, "Models for Theory," in his *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 276-295.
- 42 Arnheim, "Order and Complexity in Landscape Design."
- 43 Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 176.
- 44 Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 3.
- 45 Arnheim, "The Accent on the Middle," in *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1982), esp. 72-73.
- 46 Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 437-440.
- 47 Arnheim, "Limits and Frames," in *The Power of the Center*, 51-71.
- 48 Arnheim, "Perceptual Abstraction and Art," in *Toward a Psychology of Art*, 27-50, esp. 46-48.

*Universe is My Heart No.6, 1999*

Ink and color on paper

73.23 x 144.09 in (186 x 366 cm)

National Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung





*Spring Hills beyond a Rain-Splattered Window*, 1995

Ink and color on paper

37.40 x 69.69 in (95 x 177 cm)

Collection of Hsueh-Tu Lu, Taiwan



*Little Heaven Lake*, 2005

Ink and color on paper

23.03 x 37.48 in (58.5 x 95.2 cm)

Private Collection, Taiwan



*Spring Feeling beneath Snow Branch: Tibet Series No. 163, 2011*

Ink and color on paper

36.18 × 35.91 in (91.9 × 91.2 cm)

Collection of Shandong Museum

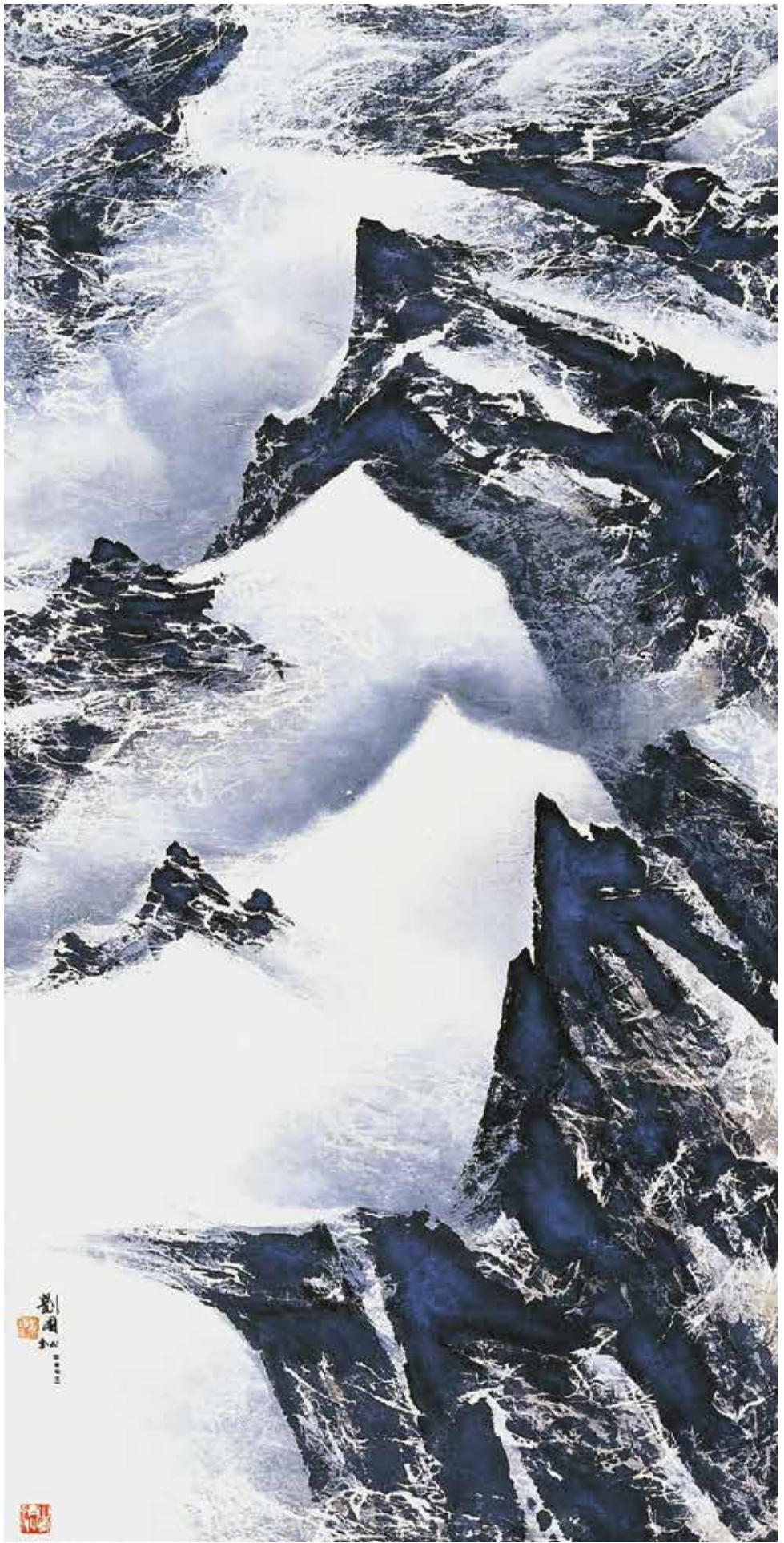


**Summit: Tibet Series No.48, 2003**

Ink and color on paper

72.83 x 35.83 in (185 x 91 cm)

Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Cognie, Geneva

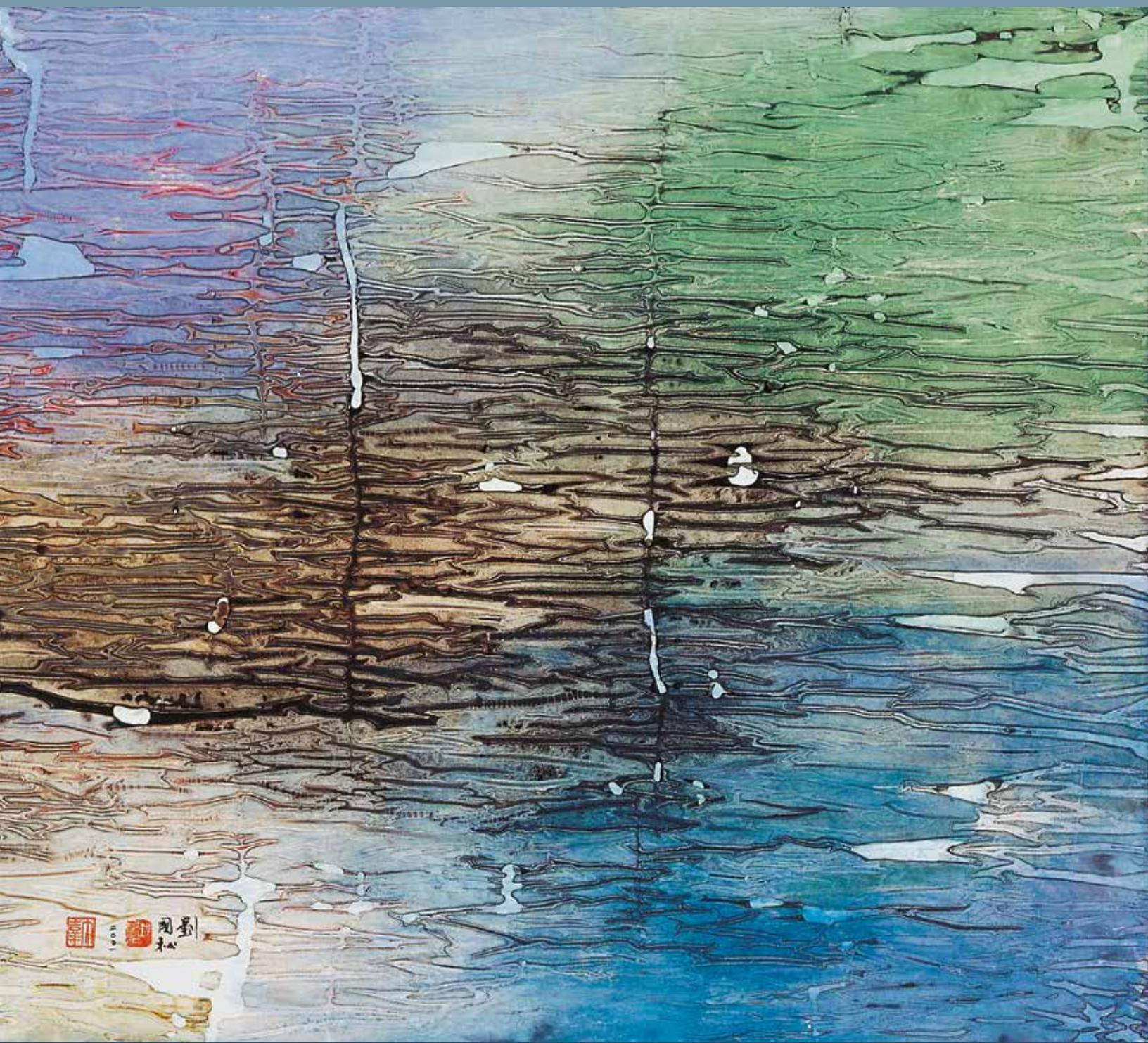


*Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No.13, 2001 (detail)*

Ink and color on paper

27.95 × 31.10 in (71 × 79 cm)

Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection



- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Yu Kwang-chung           | <b>From Poem in the Painting, Painting in the Poem:<br/>Liu Kuo-sung vs. Yu Kwang-chung</b> (1999)   |
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Poems by Yu Kwang-chung

FROM POEM IN THE PAINTING, PAINTING IN THE POEM:  
LIU KUO-SUNG VS. YU KWANG-CHUNG

1999



FIG 1 Liu Kuo-sung, *Golden Autumn*, 1966. Ink and color on paper, 22.05 × 35.43 in (56 × 90 cm)

**Golden Autumn**

Prime among the Five Elements, Metal is tensile and true  
September's frosty punishment, drives leaves to frenzy  
Western wind stirs up the five-tone scale's autumnal pitch  
Shaking summer awake from its torpor  
In the space of one night the heavens change their expression  
The mountainous choirs shout out their craggy authority  
As the days of the Double Ninth fest's joyous clamor approach  
All at once the sea level broaches the crowns of the peaks  
How to bear a burden of melancholy and stress  
To this extreme? Looking back  
The twisted mountain path taken is obscured in fog  
Even if tracing it back were possible, how many Kalpas  
Has the Earth endured?  
The ironmonger Nüwa, down on her luck,  
Retires the red-hot annealing tool that smelted the heavens into One  
Yet overcome by ultraviolet rays, pretty purple poison,  
That pierce the North Pole's sinkholes  
And gush forth in waterfalls

**金秋**

五行為首，金是至堅與至貞  
九月的霜刑，木葉紛紛  
當西風吹起了商籟  
把懈怠的盛夏憾醒  
一夜之間已天地變色  
羣峰肅然在高處招引重九清  
秋登臨的豪情  
海拔突兀到了這絕頂  
憂煩的重擔當真能夠  
一路跟上來嗎？回望身後  
山徑蜿蜒已迷失在霧裏  
就算能回去，下面的古間又經歷  
了幾劫？女媧頹然  
把新煉的補天石放下  
任美麗而有毒的紫外線  
穿透北極的漏洞孔  
飛瀑一般瀉下



**FIG 2** Liu Kuo-sung, *Moon Walk*, 1969. Ink and color on paper, 27.17 × 33.46 in (69 × 85 cm). Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan

### Moon Walk

The startled looks of the world  
Focused on you alone  
In the land of myths and dreams  
As the first normal miraculous man  
Appeared in the frame

Why is it that moon-based Chang E and earthly Diana  
Failed to embrace you upon arrival,  
Failed to accompany you on your lunar stroll  
Along the silent seashore  
Along the meteor crater's precipice?

The poet Li Bai's immortal lines  
Will now be sung helter-skelter:

"Gazing up, I see my homeland  
(so lonely, so lovely)  
Gazing down, I'm strutting on the moon!"

Your first small step  
A giant leap forward for mankind.  
Or has God taken a step backwards?  
Oh stalwart Armstrong! You alone have traversed infinity.

### 月球漫步

全宇宙驚羨的眼神  
焦聚都在你一身  
看神話和夢的領土  
第一個不凡的凡人  
怎麼入境

不知嫦娥或黛安娜  
為何沒出來迎接  
來陪你一同步月  
在寧靜海畔  
或隕石坑邊

谪仙的名句  
應該倒過來吟了  
舉頭望故鄉  
(多陌生而又壯麗啊)  
低頭踏明月

你跨出一小步  
是人逼進一大步呢  
還是神讓了一步?  
壯哉阿姆斯壯  
你獨步千古

## Encirclement

The heavens revolve in a geometric Way  
God being the most humble geometrician  
God says: Spheres are perfect shapes  
Twisting and turning, suspended in free-flowing fluid  
The orbs of Yin and of Yang, both within the Creator's grasp  
Forever pushing and pulling each other, yet in orderly fashion  
Upon our own vast aquatic-terrestrial globe  
Spinning in murky globs of Primal Essence  
Eking out four seasons via climatic changes  
Such meteorology endlessly spinning eastward  
Watch as the omnipotent Net of Heaven, enclosing all longitudes  
and latitudes,  
Secretly bends the flat horizons of land and sea into gargantuan arcs  
Empowered by the sun and the moon  
God indeed is the ultimate geometrician  
Having bestowed small seeing orbs on mere mortals  
Allowing those sparkling globes to pursue and capture  
The megaspheres of Yin and Yang  
As the heavens revolve on geometric principles

## 環中

天行乎幾何之大道  
神是最樸素的幾何学家  
神說，最圓滿是球体  
無碍無阻，運轉最流利  
陰陽双球在造化掌中  
拋來又接去，從不失手  
而我們这水陸的大球  
運轉著渾茫的元氣  
風雲变化交接的四季  
那氣象，永遠輪迴向東方  
看天網恢恢，東經和北緯 將地  
平，水平，隐隐都拗成  
多魁梧的弧线，呼应日輪和月輪  
最高妙的幾何學家，是神  
把至小的眼球賜給凡人  
讓我們用靈動的瞳人  
去追攝陰陽宏大的球体  
天乎行幾何之原理



FIG 3 Liu Kuo-sung, *Central Ring*, 1972  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 70.47 x 36.22 in (179 x 92cm)



FIG 4 Liu Kuo-sung, *Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles*, 1985  
Ink and color on paper, 15.75 x 10.43 in (40 x 26.5cm)  
Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection, England

### Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles

The rockface, an unlined notebook  
How then to fill the diary with wind and frost?  
The featureless mountain has no crags, no outcrops  
How then to carve out the jutting forehead of a perilous cliff?  
Yet water is the most supple and passive element  
Wherein lies its winsome charm  
Water invented its own dry brushstrokes—rippling dashes  
As the days rub and the months abrade  
An exquisite texture emerges  
Page by page, this mysterious geological record  
The supreme Book of Nature needs no form of orthography  
Ask not if Da Yu has channeled the flood waters  
Time alone has left its vital pinpricks  
Why should Destiny, unfathomable, beyond men's understanding—  
Reveal its secrets?

### 吹皺的山光

石而無紋

怎么記風霜的日記?

山而不皺

怎么刻絕壁的額頭?

而水是最隨緣的了

性之所至

發明了獨有的皴法

日磨月磋

細膩中別有韻味

一頁頁神秘的地質史

最美的天書何須文字?

莫問大禹有沒有來過

早已被歲月喫穴天機如

此深沉

怎肯就道破?



FIG 5 Liu Kuo-sung, *Mountain, Lotus*, 1986. Ink and color on paper, 26.77 × 34.84 in (68 × 88.5 cm). Collection of Shandong Museum

### Evoking the Lotus

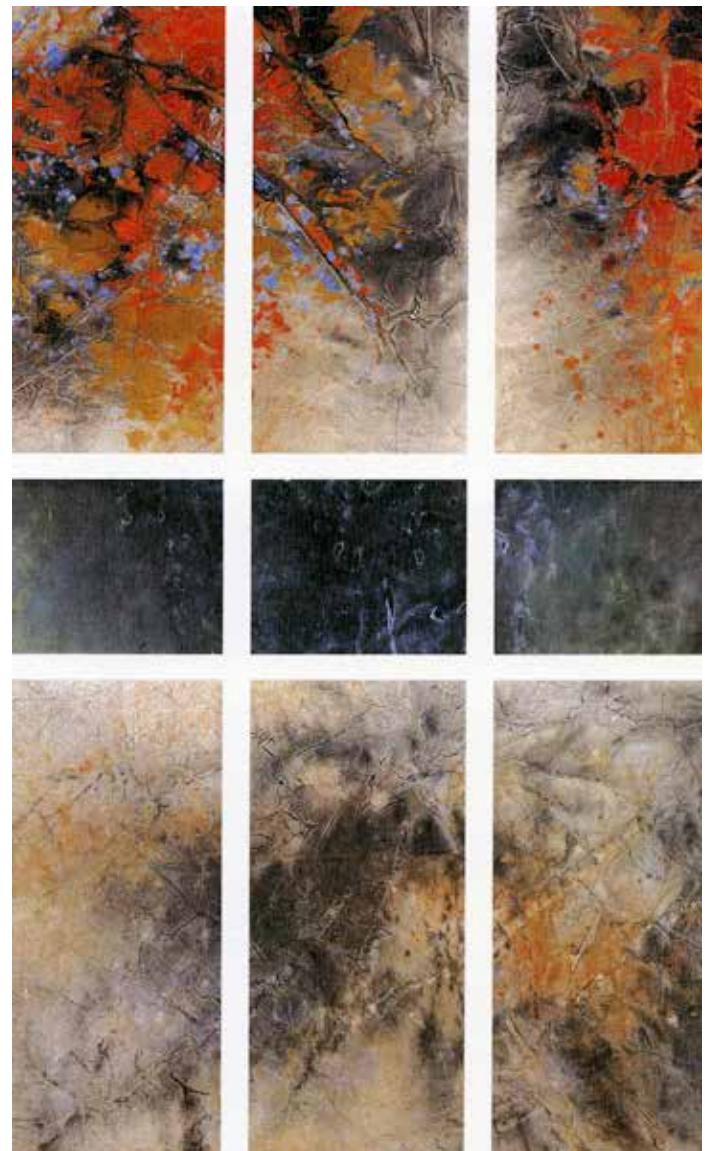
I remember my "Evoking the Lotus"  
As a young poet, I filled an entire scroll  
And today you surprise me with a painting  
Called Evoking the Lotus  
And ask me to write a poem about it...  
Our sanguine youth now drained of blood  
And the ominous red-tailed dragonflies have flown far away  
All that remains are those broad inky leaves  
The lotus exhausted  
So remote from the joyous lotus of Monet's dream  
Awaiting a battering rainstorm at night  
Damn Autumn! You have not come in time.  
His beloved no more, an old monk is here to stay  
Alone with a frog and the chilly moon on the still water  
Bitterly conducting the pond's silent meditation

### 荷的联想

記得「蓮的联想」  
年輕時我寫過一整卷  
而今「荷的联想」  
老來不料你竟畫一張  
還要我為你題詩一首  
當年的紅艳早已不再  
紅尾蜻蜓也都已飛走  
只留下這些闊葉的墨荷  
還在莫內彩荷的夢外  
等待一晚無情的雨声  
管他秋天啊幾時才來呢  
情人去後，只留下了老僧  
獨對蛙靜月冷的止水  
苦守一池的禪定

### **Autumnal Sounds Outside my Window, Dreams Within**

Autumn of discontent  
Is it the red maple's autumn blaze  
Illuminating the wildfires at dusk?  
Or is the incandescent sky  
Toasting the face in the window to a drunken flush?  
A fire roars across the burning plain  
Autumn threatening to combust right in front of my windowsill  
While the dreamer within  
Reclines on a pillow sailing towards a dark fantasy  
On the burnt-out strip of smoke and water  
The flickering of one or two sparks  
The flames leap over the windowsill  
He turns over in his sleep  
The carmine blood of autumn  
Buried in his soul, a conflagration smoldering between heaven  
and earth  
Sneaking around the fingertips of memory  
Tiptoeing into his dream



### **窗外秋声窗裏夢**

是楓樹的秋燒  
引燃晚霞的野火?  
還是天邊的火勢  
烘熱窗前的酡顏?  
烈焰炎炎正燎原而來  
秋天已經快威脅窗台  
正在做夢的窗裏人  
枕頭渡向曖昧的幻境  
灰沉沉的一帶煙水  
卻有一粒兩粒火星  
炙炙越过了窗台  
他翻了一個身  
赤艳艳的秋之血

魂魄深處的一場火災正沿著

記憶的指印  
躡進他的夢來

**FIG 6** Liu Kuo-sung, *Autumnal Sounds Outside my Window, Dreams Within*, 1995  
Ink and color on paper, 67.72 x 40.75 in (172 x 103.5 cm)  
Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan

(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

This poetic and visual dialogue was previously published in *Shiqing huayi ji: Liu Guosong VS. Yu Guangzhong [Poetry in Painting: A Collection of Liu Luo-sung's Paintings and Yu Kwang-chung's Poems]* (Taipei and Taichung: Xinyuan yishu, Xiandai hualang, 1999).

Chia Chi Jason Wang

## ON LIU KUO-SUNG'S 1961 RETURN TO INK LANDSCAPE PAINTING

2013

IN 1961, THE "PALACE MUSEUM" held a preview of a travelling exhibition of the Museum's ancient Chinese art treasures bound for the United States.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition (February 2–8) took place in the Provincial Museum located in Taipei's New Park [now the 228 Memorial Park]. According to the Palace Museum's own records, the week-long exhibition "...was attended by so many visitors beginning from day one, that it was necessary to institute a timed-entry system to prevent overcrowding."<sup>2</sup> Liu Kuo-sung, a painter in his late twenties, was among those bumping shoulders with other viewers at the exhibition.

In a 1969 interview with Wei Tiancong, Liu candidly admitted, "That exhibition affected me deeply. Three of the paintings shown, Fan Kuan's (c. 960–c. 1030) *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, Shen Zhou's (1427–1509) *Lofty Mount Lu*, and Guo Xi's (1020–1090) *Early Spring*, especially impressed me (Fig. 1). Their impact on me in fact was so profound that they became major influences in my work."<sup>3</sup> A review and analysis of Liu's lifelong artistic and literary oeuvre made from a contemporary perspective indeed confirm the importance of that Preview exhibition to Liu's artistic development, and further attest that it also marked a critical turning point in his personal awakening.

In an interview with Wai-lim Yip (Ye Weilian), Liu stated: "From 1955 to 1961, I worked only in oils....During that time, my practice was advancing along the same lines as contemporary Western painting."<sup>4</sup> More specifically, he added, "In 1961 I went back to ink painting (*shuimohua*) ...."<sup>5</sup> And in an artist's statement he recalled: "In the fall of 1961, I discarded my oil painting materials once and for all, and went back to using Chinese ink, brushes, and paper for the first time in nearly ten years. From then on, I was completely immersed in creating abstract landscapes and painted a large number of works."<sup>6</sup> These statements further testify that the influence of that 1961 Palace Museum exhibition was both substantive and profoundly transformative for Liu Kuo-sung. Even more importantly, his experience at the exhibition resulted in the artist's return to Chinese brush painting, and the discovery of his true métier. On this basis he was able to pursue the artistic ideals he had first embraced in early 1959: to find a "new path," an artistic language based on his experience in both Chinese and Western painting, drawing on elements from both traditions.<sup>7</sup> This new path was a convergence of Western Abstract Expressionism and abstract Chinese ink painting.

But apart from the intellectual and spiritual realizations that the National Palace Museum preview sparked in the young Liu Kuo-sung on that early February day in 1961, did it also have a discernably concrete impact on his artistic practice? According to art historian Chu-tsing Li (Li Zhujin), "In the early 1960s, Liu Kuo-sung was experimenting with applying plaster to his canvases. He began to follow the style of Fan K'uan [Fan Kuan], Kuo [Guo Xi], and Shen Chou's [Shen Zhou] landscape paintings, and paint



FIG. 1 Fan Kuan  
(act. ca. 990–1030)  
*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, early 11th c.  
Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 81.2 × 40.7 in  
(206.3 × 103.3 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei



FIG. 2 Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932),  
*The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*, 1961. Oil and plaster  
on canvas, 74.02 × 36.22 in  
(188 × 92 cm)



FIG. 3 Guo Xi (ca. 1020–1090), *Early Spring*, 1072. Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 62.32 × 42.56 in (158.3 × 108.1 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei



FIG. 4 Liu Kuo-sung, *Red Cliffs*, 1961

Oil and plaster on canvas,  
64.95 x 36.22 in (167.5 x 92 cm)



FIG. 5 Wu Yuanzhi (1115–1234), *The Red Cliff*, ca. 12th century

Handscroll, ink on paper, 20 x 53.70 in (50.8 x 136.4 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei



FIG. 6 Liu Kuo-sung, *Lofty Mount Lu*, 1961

Oil and plaster on canvas, 74 x 36.22 in (188 x 92 cm)  
Collection of Art Institute of Chicago (AIC)



FIG. 7 Shen Zhou (1427–1509), *Lofty Mount Lu*, 1467

Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper,  
76.30 x 38.62 in (193.8 x 98.1 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei

similar compositions which were imbued with the same traditional mood. While Liu used Western tools and techniques, and painted in a Western Abstract Expressionist style, the mood in these paintings echoed the feeling of traditional Chinese works.<sup>18</sup> According to Li's analysis of Liu Kuo-sung's works from that period, *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall* (1961) (Fig. 2) echoed the Northern Song (960–1127) painter Guo Xi's *Early Spring* (1072) (Fig. 3). *Red Cliffs* (1961) (Fig. 4) reflected the Jin-dynasty (1115–1234) artist Wu Yuanzhi's (late 12th century) painting of the same Chinese name (Fig. 5); and Liu's *Lofty Mount Lu* (1961) (Fig. 6) took its inspiration from Shen Zhou's identically titled painting from 1467 (Fig. 7). We can thus conclude that Liu's paintings were a product of his close observation of these early works at the Preview exhibition.

*The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*, *Red Cliffs* and *Lofty Mount Lu* were executed on canvas with Western art materials in a manner that sought to evoke the "flavor" of Chinese ink painting.<sup>19</sup> As Liu wrote, "For more than two years, I painted works on canvas evoking the feeling and style of ink painting (and later spread plaster on the canvas before applying paint)."<sup>20</sup> This experimental period lasted from early 1959 to the summer of 1961.<sup>21</sup> *An Elegant Gathering in the Cold Forest*, probably dating from the same period, is similar in style and execution to the three works mentioned above (Fig. 8).

In contemporary critical terms, we might describe those paintings as examples of "deconstruction," insofar as they enact a process of breaking down the Chinese artistic tradition which informed the early scrolls mentioned above. This novel method of creation, a dialectical deconstruction of the past, is at first glance simply "an essentially traditional attack on tradition itself." That this anomalous activity took place first in the art world of early-1960s Taiwan, and not at any point throughout the many centuries of Chinese painting history, is remarkable. As Chu-tsing Li has pointed out, Liu's *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*, *Red Cliffs*, *Lofty Mount Lu* and even *An Elegant Gathering in the Cold Forest* reference the structure of the original works by these ancient Chinese masters, especially in terms of their compositional arrangement. Yet, in his own response to and dialogue with the past, Liu rejects the trend of "copying the ancients" embraced by the early Qing-dynasty literati painters and

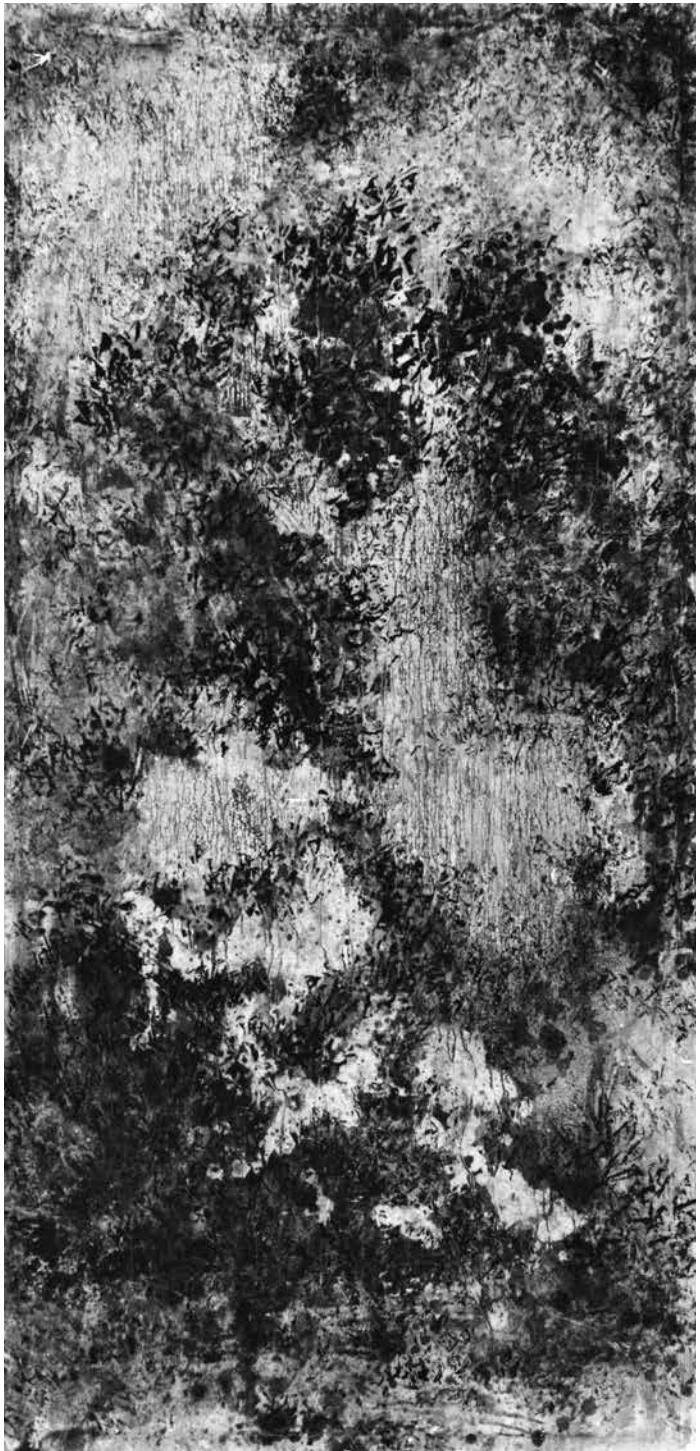


FIG. 8 Liu Kuo-sung, *An Elegant Gathering in the Cold Forest*, 1961  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 73.82 x 36.22 in (187.5 x 92 cm)

their successors. In other words, he does not attempt to copy the ancients in style or technique, but rather adopts a contrarian stance in regard to that classical tradition. In Liu's paintings, the explicit composition, distinct brushstrokes, and orderly legibility of traditional Chinese painting descends into compositional chaos, with a mishmash of brush strokes creating a whirling confusion of movement on the painting's surface. Specifically, in their depiction of mountains in the great landscape scrolls of the past, traditional Chinese painters used the "bone" technique to painstakingly define every corner, angle, and surface of the mountain; Liu Kuo-sung, on the other hand, shatters that unified composition and disperses the physical details on the painting's surface. The result is an inchoate, abstract, molten mass. In his paintings, this turbid, fluid body resembles a snow-covered landmass gradually dissolving, or a landscape left in ruins after a scorching by Zhu Rong, the God of Fire.

If we approach the works of Liu Kuo-sung discussed above in terms of traditional Chinese painting, then we can only describe Liu as an iconoclast, rebel, or "bad boy." He undermines the transparency and "readability" of traditional Chinese painting, sometimes to an extreme degree. If we attempt to judge Liu Kuo-sung's paintings in terms of the canonic principles of discipline and organization inherent in the practice of the Chinese painting tradition, or apply the meticulous standards of painting connoisseurship passed down over the course of a millennium, we will simply miss the mark. When viewers steeped in that refined tradition confront one of Liu's paintings, their reaction can be only one of shock and awe, as if finding themselves stranded in a dense fog, thoroughly disoriented. Not only do his paintings challenge conventional notions of aesthetic "security" and artistic judgement, viewers of his works can find themselves lost in a primordial, featureless state of anarchy.

Liu's sharp break with traditional Chinese painting ultimately gave birth to something strikingly new. In a 1985 essay about painting, Liu forthrightly stated: "In the course of my artistic career, I had to understand tradition in order to reject tradition. That understanding is a precondition for innovation."<sup>13</sup> From Liu's point of view, "Understanding tradition is a first step towards abandoning tradition. But not having a thorough understanding of tradition, and then rejecting it blindly—I can't imagine such a thing. The ultimate purpose of abandoning tradition is to create an entirely new tradition, building upon the worthwhile aspects of the past. This is not a matter of rebellion for its own sake. There is a positive goal in the process; and that is, simply put, artistic creativity itself."<sup>14</sup> Following Liu's line of reasoning, his outrightly anti-traditional trajectory after attending the 1961 National Palace Museum preview, and his confrontational dialogue with the ancient masters, only demonstrated his actual reverence for the masters of the past.<sup>15</sup>

Liu's pioneering path—unlike the revisionist "copy the ancients" and reformist strategies practiced by the vast majority of Chinese ink painters, was a provocative, risk-taking act of dismantling the past that set out to effect a completely new creative platform. In striking out on this path, Liu specifically chose Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, and Shen Zhou as the objects of his aesthetic challenge. At the same time, he showed relentless determination and perseverance in realizing his new ideas through his painting practice, never once turning back.

Liu Kuo-sung's practice is unprecedented in the history of Chinese painting. The majority of traditional Chinese painters start out by immersing themselves in tradition, then breaking away

from tradition and finally developing their own individual style, or even founding their own school. Liu Kuo-sung's relationship to tradition was one of dialectical opposition, consciously adopting an "anti-traditional" approach to the juggernaut of Chinese tradition. It can be easily misinterpreted as a desire to destroy tradition. His actual motive, however, was to spark his own creativity, and his ultimate goal to bring a new tradition into being. Liu often has quoted a famous line from the text *Huayu lu* (Recorded Remarks on Painting) by the seventeenth-century monk-painter Shitao 1642–1707: "I am what I am, because all I have is myself."<sup>16</sup> This despite the fact that the two painters' creative practices are as different as night and day. Shitao's entire career revolved around his eclectic integration of tradition and his close study of the styles of the masters of his day. It is through this process that he gradually formed his unique individual style. Thus, while Shitao emphasized the importance of individual creation, he never formally opposed tradition, nor did he use deconstruction as a means of asserting his individuality. In other words, Shitao pursued tradition, seeking to forge a unique path through the terrain of the past and the ground of his own present. Liu, on the other hand, sought to distance himself from tradition, and had little compunction about deconstructing the past and rebelling against it, sometimes taking this to an extreme. Many of his statements allude to this trend: "In painting, one may use all possible means to satisfy the need for self-expression."<sup>17</sup> "Seek first to be unique, then to be excellent."<sup>18</sup> "Forget about the [traditional] centered-brush technique; forget about brushes altogether."<sup>19</sup> Such pronouncements and practices are the very opposite of Shitao's approach. In the end, none of Liu's deconstructive techniques were meant to turn traditional painting on its head, nor did he treat tradition with post-modern arrogance and disregard. Rather, he sought to challenge the authority of the centuries-old cudgel wielded by the ultraconservative Chinese literati painters, as well as express his dissatisfaction with the stifling atmosphere of the Taiwan art world, with an end to establishing a new and more broadminded tradition.<sup>20</sup>

In looking back at Liu Kuo-sung's creative history, we have seen how the February 1961 exhibition at the Palace Museum, and the works *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*, *Red Cliffs*, *Lofty Mount Lu* and *An Elegant Gathering in the Cold Forest*, which he created in its aftermath, undoubtedly played a pivotal role in opening up new territory for his personal dialogue with the Chinese painting tradition. As Chu-tsing Li has said, this experience also became a key turning point in Liu's own development.<sup>21</sup> Through these works Liu Kuo-sung created a new dialectical model by which artists could engage with tradition, while opening up new paths and new possibilities for later contemporary ink painters. In so doing, Liu Kuo-sung also created his own ineluctable stature within the Chinese painting tradition.

Only a few months after finishing his four pathbreaking works discussed above, in the autumn of 1961 Liu completed an ink painting on paper entitled *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* (Fig. 9). Did he choose this title unconsciously? Or was it the outcome of the artist's deeply felt introspection? In this work, Liu employs his abstract deconstructed style. The critic Wai-lim Yip [Ye Weilian] has pointed out its close similarity to Liu's slightly earlier *Lofty Mount Lu*.<sup>22</sup>

Compared to the style of *Lofty Mount Lu*, *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* is a formless, nonfigurative work, devoid of concrete imagery. Viewing it leaves one with a dizzying sense of vertigo, as if the painter had abandoned Chinese tradition long, long ago.



FIG. 9 Liu Kuo-sung, *I Hear Your Voice, My Country*, 1961  
Ink on paper, 51.97 x 26.38 in (132 x 67 cm)

Liu's separation from his homeland makes it difficult for him to use concrete forms or imagery to capture and illustrate his personal predicament. Here it seems that his "country" or homeland (*guxiang*), itself has become something unstable, flowing and distorted, a subject that can only be approached spiritually. At the same time, the title Liu chose for the painting obviously alludes to the artist's desire to hear the voice of his country; but fate has foiled that rendezvous. Liu's feeling of estrangement from his homeland is achingly clear.

Of course, we can say that Liu Kuo-sung intentionally maintained a distance from his homeland—if that "homeland" can be interpreted to mean art history and traditional painting. Perhaps only such detachment could help him to preserve a kind of purity and objectivity, preventing him from falling into the snare of the Chinese artistic tradition, and allowing him to maintain his artistic independence, integrity and subjectivity, following the path of Shitao's "...all I have is myself." In other words, Liu Kuo-sung chose to distance himself from both Chinese tradition and his geographical homeland in order to maintain critical objectivity, and the sense of alienation and disaffection essential for creativity. Looked at from another angle, the notion of "country" or "homeland" in the titles of Liu's paintings could simply refer to his physical homeland. In that sense, Liu may use his unstable, dynamic landscapes as a way to express his feeling of homesickness and nostalgia for his birthplace. One work completed somewhat earlier than the

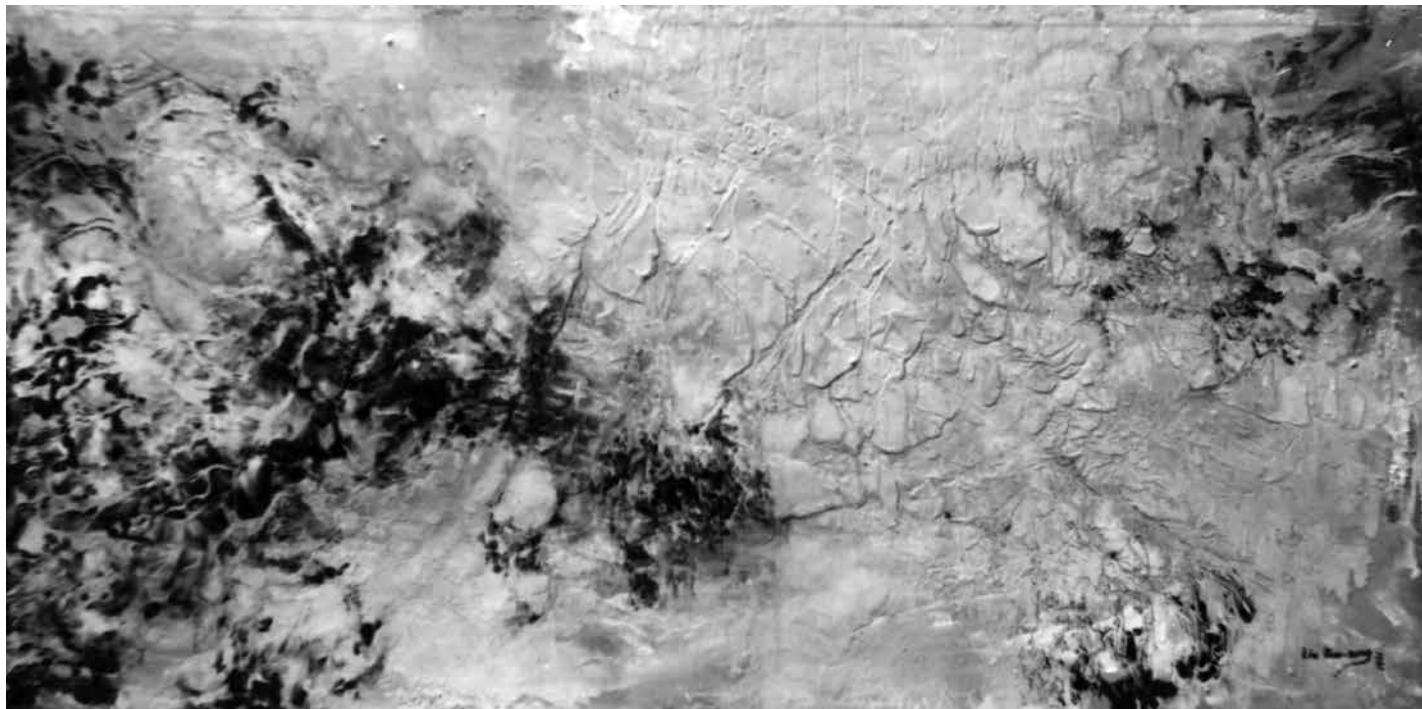


FIG. 10 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Yellow Dust Clouds My Dreams of Distant Homeland*, 1961  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 37.01 x 75.98 in (94 x 193 cm). Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC)



FIG. 11 Liu Kuo-sung, *Between Tears and Laughter*, 1960  
Oil and plaster on canvas, 36.22 x 73.23 in (92 x 186 cm)

painting discussed above that exhibits this type of longing is *The Yellow Dust Clouds My Dreams of My Distant Homeland* (Fig. 10).<sup>23</sup>

In another painting probably completed in 1960, *Between Tears and Laughter* (*Kuzhi xiaozhi*) (Fig. 11),<sup>24</sup> the title closely resembles the four-character phrase *yiku yixiao*, literally “crying and laughing,” with which Bada Shanren (1626–1705), an eccentric painter from the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, signed his scrolls.<sup>25</sup> Naturally, by using this epigram as a title, Liu is hinting to his personal anxiety and longing, reflections stirred up by the pain of being estranged from his homeland since 1949. In other words, the political separation of Taiwan from mainland China created a tragic-comic trauma in Liu, similar to what befell Bada Shanren following the tumultuous Ming-Qing dynastic transition: the descent into a kind of crazed suffering. Thus Liu’s paintings from 1960 and 1961 can be interpreted as an expression of personal distress over the political turmoil that occurred on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. As well as being an iconoclastic assertion of individual creativity, these works offer up a profound lament over the fate of modern China.

In summing up, we can see that behind Liu Kuo-sung’s iconoclastic landscape paintings from his formative years in the early 1960s, there also lay an urgent sense of nostalgia and anxiety for his homeland.

(Translated by Don J. Cohn)

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\*All images of works by Liu Kuo-sung featured in this essay are courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.

## Notes

- 1 National Palace Museum (Guoli Gugong bowuyuan), (ed.), *Guoli Gugong qishi xingshuang* [Seven Decades of the National Palace Museum] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshu guan, 1995), 177.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Wei Tiancong, “Confessions of a Painter: A Conversation with Liu Kuo-sung [Yige huajia de poubai: yu Liu Kuo-sung de yixi duitan]” in *Selected Essays on Liu Kuo-sung’s Art* [Liu Kuo-sung yanjiu wenxuan], ed. Chun-yi Lee (Li Junyi), (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1996), 279.
- 4 Wai-lim Yip (Ye Weilian), “Yu sushi tuiyi, yu sucai buyi: Liu Guosong de chouxiang huihua” [Negotiating the Seen and Unseen, Experimenting with Materials: Liu Kuo-sung’s Abstract Ink Paintings], in *Selected Essays on Liu Kuo-sung’s Art*, 296. Liu Kuo-sung repeatedly mentions seeing Fan Kuan’s *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* at the February 1961 exhibition, and recalls the visual and spiritual shock he felt upon viewing the original scroll. But in this interview Lim errs in stating that the exhibition took place in 1965 (or this perhaps may have been an error of the interview transcription?).
- 5 Ibid., 297
- 6 Liu Kuo-sung, “The Developmental Trajectory of My Own Painting Practice [Wo geren huihua fazhan de guijii],” in *Xiongshi meishu* (Lion Art) 5, no. 7 (1971): 22.
- 7 Ibid., 21
- 8 Chu-tsing Li, “The Confluence of Chinese and Western Art: The Artistic Growth of the Painter Liu Kuo-sung,” in *The Paintings of Liu Kuo-sung* [Liu Guosong huaji]. (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1992) 25.
- 9 Chu-tsing Li, “The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist,” in *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1969), 28.
- 10 Liu, “The Developmental Trajectory of My Own Painting Practice,” 21.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Liu Kuo-sung, “Huigu guoqu, kaifang weilai” [Look to the Past, Create the Future], in *Mingpao Monthly* (Mingbao yuekan), September 1985, 19.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 In numerous interviews and conversations, Liu Kuo-sung restated his visual and spiritual surprise at viewing Fan Kuan’s *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* at the Taiwan Provincial Museum in 1961. See, for example, Wei Tiancong, *Confessions*, fn 3, 279–280; also see Liu Kuo-sung, “Wode sixiang licheng” [My Intellectual Journey], *Xiandai meishu* (Journal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum) 29 (April/May 1990): 19.
- 16 See Hsiao Chong-ray (Xiao Qiongrui), “Zai chuantong yu xiandai zhi jian—wei Zhongguo meishu xiandaihua kailu de Liu Guosong” [Between Tradition and Modernity: Liu Kuo-sung as a Pioneer in the Modernization of Chinese Art], in *Selected Essays on Liu Kuo-sung’s Art*, 64. Also see Liu Kuo-sung, “Huigu guoqu, kaichuang weilai” 91, 94–95.
- 17 Ibid., 97
- 18 Liu Kuo-sung, “Xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao—congshi meishu jiaoyu shishidian de yidian tiwu” [Seek First to be Unique, and Then to be Excellent: A Few Reflections on My Forty Years in Art Education], *Guofu jinianguan yuekan* (Journal of National Dr.Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall), November 1999, 157–158.
- 19 Liu, “Huigu guoqu, kaifang weilai.” Also see Liu, “My Intellectual Journey,” 19.
- 20 Liu Kuo-sung, “Chouxiang huihua yu shuimo biaoxian” [Abstract Painting and Ink Expressionism], in *Xiandai meishu* (Journal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum) 82 (February 1999): 13–14.
- 21 See Chu-tsing Li, “The Confluence of Chinese and Western Art,” 16.
- 22 See Yip, “Negotiating,” 292.
- 23 This work also combines oil and plaster on canvas. It has been posited that the titles of Liu’s paintings are identical with his creative conception at the moment of painting. Even if a title was not decided during or just after finishing a painting, it still would reflect his original creative impulse. See Wai-lim Yip, *ibid.*, 292.
- 24 In the work *Between Tears and Laughter*, Liu also primed the canvas with plaster.
- 25 [Bada Shanren signed his works with a graphic cipher that has been interpreted as *kuzhi xiaozhi*, not *yiku yixiao*.]



## INK TRANSFORMATIONS: MODERN INK IN TAIWAN

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### 1. "Wild and Rustic": Ink Painting in Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Taiwan

Ink painting as a medium was introduced to Taiwan from China in the early 17th century. Shen Guangwen (1612–1688), regarded as the founder of Taiwan's literary culture, arrived in Taiwan in 1652. Teaching in the Zhuluo area (present-day Chiayi and Tainan cities), he earned some renown for his writings. Later, Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong, 1624–1662) retreated to Taiwan with his Ming restorationist troops, among whom were surely a number of scholars and painters. Even Koxinga himself had been a Confucian scholar before becoming a military man. As the "Pioneer King," he is revered by later generations of Taiwanese, and many examples of his calligraphy remain in private collectors in Taiwan. Zhu Shugui (1617–1683), the Prince of Ningjing of the Ming dynasty, also relocated to Taiwan and was an able calligrapher. His calligraphic works are likewise in private Taiwanese collections, and plaques inscribed with his calligraphy can be found in a number of temples.

Although Koxinga's rule lasted only 22 years, it was the first official introduction of continental Chinese culture into Taiwan and exerted an important influence on the development of its culture. Under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), ink art—calligraphy and painting—and folk art became the two pillars of artistic development in Taiwan. The two arts intermingled and mutually influenced one another, giving shape to a unique local style.

Biased in favor of the academic artistic traditions of continental China, early Taiwanese critics considered local calligraphy and painting to be illegitimate and trivial, dismissing them as "unable to shed Fujian customs" (*butuo Min xi*), "dense and chaotic to a fault" (*shi zhi nongzhuo*), and even "a heterodoxy of mad expressions" (*kuangtai xiexue*). After decades of research and discovery, historians of Taiwanese art now recognize calligraphy and painting practiced in Ming and Qing Taiwan more positively as an expression of a "wild and rustic" (*kuangye*) aesthetic grounded in a specific historical milieu and its social mores.

The terms *kuang* (wild) and *ye* (rustic) can both be traced to Confucius's sayings in the *Analects*: "If you cannot manage to find a person of perfectly balanced conduct to associate with, I suppose you must settle for the wild or the fastidious. In their pursuit of the Way, the wild plunge right in, while the fastidious are always careful not to get their hands dirty." "When native substance overwhelms cultural refinement, the result is a crude rustic. When cultural refinement overwhelms native substance, the result is a foppish pedant. Only when culture and native substance are perfectly mixed and balanced do you have a gentleman." "Wild and rustic,"

therefore, may be taken to refer to an aggressive attitude in excess of cultural refinement and an aesthetic inclination indifferent to formality and restraint.

The art historian Wang Yao-ting writes,

The term "Fujian customs" was applied to the Taiwanese regional style of this period. It referred to [paintings with] unrestrained and unrefined brushwork and inkwork. The depicted objects were largely finished in seconds, without any charming suggestiveness. These paintings were dense and chaotic in mood, overwhelming in effect and wholly without reservation.

Wang cites as examples from the works of various artists such as Lin Chaoying (1739–1816), Zhuang Jingfu (ca. 1800), Lin Jue (1796–1850), Chen Bangxuan (1770–1850), Ye Wenzhou (1741–1827), Lin Tianshou (dates unknown), and calligrapher Zhang Chaoxiang (18th century). At the same time, he also points out that the style of these painters and calligraphers were obviously influenced by Fujianese artists such as Huang Shen (1687–1772), Zheng Wenlin (sobriquet Zhang Dianxian, act. ca. 1522–1566), Zhang Ruitu (1570–1641), Xie Guanqiao (1811–1864), or even Zhu Xi (1130–1200). However, as Wang also points out,

Judged solely on the basis of technical sophistication, painting on an island on the margins of Chinese culture naturally cannot compare [with that in continental China]. Terms of criticisms leveled at the Zhe School, such as "a heterodoxy of mad behavior" and "dense and chaotic to a fault," were also apt descriptions of Taiwanese painting. However, careful comparison reveals that this style, while related to Fujianese style, in fact differed from it in subtle ways. Perhaps we can call it "Taiwanese style."

Precisely what was "Taiwanese style"? Wang identifies its defining characteristic as "rustic flavor" (*yequ*):

A crucial distinction in classical Chinese aesthetics is between "refined" (*ya*) and "vulgar" (*su*). There was not only nothing refined about Taiwanese taste, which had the rustic flavor of the countryside about it. [...] Harsh and hostile local conditions demanded of early settlers in Taiwan a courageous pioneering attitude, which inclined them towards rustic rather than refined appreciation. Disparate from the mainstream taste in continental China, Taiwanese taste displays the rustic charm associated with the countryside: rapid brushstrokes that excited the senses with an instantaneous and direct visual impact.

While a taste for "wild and rustic" painting may not have been unique to Taiwan, it was certainly the most widely appreciated and developed to its fullest potential in Taiwan. The legacy of this local

*Corona*, 1972–89 (detail)  
Ink and color with collage on paper  
18.43 × 73.54 in (46.8 × 186.8 cm)

style, with its bravura brushwork and use of undiluted ink, can be detected in the Modern Ink (*Xiandai shuimo*) movement of postwar Taiwan.

## 2. The Decline of Ink Painting and the Reform of "Chinese Painting"

In 1895, the Qing dynasty ceded Taiwan to Japan after its defeat in the Battle of the Yalu River.

Initially, the Japanese colonial administration tolerated traditional Chinese cultural practices. This changed following the introduction of Western-style art pedagogy, particularly the scientific practice of sketching from life. Almost all works by traditional Chinese painters were excluded from the first Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition (J: *Taiwan bijutsu tenran kai*, or *Taiten* for short). *Nihonga*, the modernist Japanese painting style based on realistic sketching, became the mainstream.

In 1982, the Japanese-trained *Nihonga* painter Lin Chih-chu (Lin Zhizhu, 1917-2008) proposed the term *jiaocai hua*, ("glue-pigment painting" or "glue painting") as a substitute for *Tōyōga* ("Eastern painting"). This marked the official separation of *Tōyōga* from ink painting. Strictly speaking, however, *jiaocai hua* was in fact a subset of *Tōyōga* that employed finely executed linear drawing and layering of heavy mineral pigments, whereas *Tōyōga* in the broader sense encompassed the traditions of ink painting and *Nanga*, or Japanese literati painting. The general public misunderstood this and even incorrectly conflated *jiaocai hua* with *Nihonga*, or Japanese-style painting.

Seeking to re-embrace Chinese cultural heritage, postwar Taiwanese *jiaocai hua* painters rebranded their work *guohua* ("national painting" or "Chinese painting"), more specifically as a kind of "new Chinese painting" (*xinshi guohua*) or "reformed Chinese painting" (*gaigeshi guohua*) that abandoned stereotype and imitation and emphasized sketching from life. This led to a 36-year debate over the orthodox tradition of Chinese painting.

[...]

## 3. The Formation of Modern Ink

"Modern Ink" has a specific definition and specific connotations in the art history of Taiwan. On one level, the term represents a departure from traditional ink painting, in particular from its *cun* texturing techniques and other codified uses of brush and ink. Modern Ink also represents a break from both the art of early-Republican mainland China and the art of colonial Taiwan. In general, Modern Ink is an artform derived from concepts of Western modernism, especially abstract painting, and puts special emphasis on pictorial composition, the formal qualities of shapes and colors, and stylistic innovations and experiments with materials and techniques.

As discussed above, the ink painting tradition of Ming- and Qing-period Taiwan was suppressed under Japanese colonial rule. At the close of World War II, a large number of mainland ink painters arrived in Taiwan. Following a general impetus towards restoring Chinese traditions, ink painting became an official part of art school curricula and gradually regained its mainstream status.

The mainland ink painters who arrived Taiwan in 1949 were generally conservative literati painters—well-educated, proficient in poetry and literature, and of a high social status. They regarded painting and calligraphy as a means of relaxation and moral

self-cultivation. For those other painters who had attempted to revolutionize ink painting and remained in the mainland, the post-war revival of ink painting in Taiwan represented a continuation of the classical tradition at the expense of modernist innovation. Taiwanese *jiaocai hua* painters, who regarded their own art as a more advanced form of Chinese painting, naturally clashed with the conservative new arrivals. The conflict between the two groups fomented the aforementioned struggle for orthodoxy in Chinese painting.

Nonetheless, the reevaluation of tradition had become unavoidable. Reacting to the excessive emphasis on imitating classical paintings in painting pedagogy, some Taiwanese art instructors espoused the notion of "sketching from life in Chinese painting" (*guohua xiesheng*). Following their lead, some painters took to using traditional brush techniques to paint, *en plein air*, local Taiwanese country scenes and cityscapes. However, the practice of *xiesheng* or "sketching from life" was not alien to but in fact always present in traditional ink painting. The reassertion of *xiesheng* in postwar Taiwan was a symptom of other questions: What subjects were legitimate for representation, and why? Should faithfulness to experience be the foremost concern for art? These questions stimulated further thinking in artists.

In the early 1960s, Western modernist discourses began to exert a strong influence on the Taiwanese art scene. The dialectics between China and the West and between tradition and modernity drove artists, especially abstract painters, towards intellectual and practical experimentations. It was against this historical backdrop that Modern Ink began to take shape as a movement.

Initially, Modern Ink artists simplistically equated abstract with modern, ink with China, and rehearsed classical aesthetic concepts such as "using void to stand for substance" (*yi xu dai shi*) and "treating white space as inked black" (*ji bai dang hei*). However, they quickly freed themselves from abstract concepts and pursued vigorous experimentation with techniques and materials.

There is an ambiguous overlap between Modern Ink and Contemporary Ink (*Dangdai shuimo*). Contemporary Ink comes in many different forms, including elaborating traditional *cun* techniques or creating one's personal style while remaining faithful to traditional brushwork. Modern Ink refers specifically to the subset of Contemporary Ink created by artists who revolt against the ink tradition and overturn preconceptions about ink painting. These artists may recognize the value of traditional aesthetics and even retain the use of traditional materials, but they are utterly untraditional in technique, thereby opening entirely new potentials for ink art.

Modern Ink has developed into a major force in Taiwan, and Liu Kuo-sung is undeniably its leading personality.

In early 1961, Liu, who had been an unsparing critic of *Nihonga* as practiced by young Taiwanese painters, turned around to question traditional Chinese painting, which he had previously revered. In an essay written that year, Liu criticized the exhibits in the Traditional Chinese Painting section of the Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition (*Taiwan quansheng meizhan*) as "having been repeatedly painted hundreds and thousands of times" and resembling "animal specimens pinned to a wooden board"—mummified and lifeless.

As for the "reformed Chinese paintings" of the *jiaocai hua* painters, Liu Kuo-sung felt that they were merely "putting make-up and flowers on a corpse." At the time, Liu firmly believed that Chinese and Western painting would inevitably fuse and become

the “new unified global cultural doctrine” of abstract painting. He therefore concluded the essay on an optimistic note:

The concept and techniques of abstract painting have existed in our nation since ancient times. It is thus most fitting that our nation’s abstract painters will be the ones to blend the painting of East and West. Whether they manifest [abstract painting] in oil or ink, its artistic value will not be diminished as long as it is handled properly. A new cultural doctrine uniting the world will arise in China. With the tolerance and transcendental spirit inherent in Chinese civilization, we should embrace the coming of this new era.

Liu Kuo-sung had experimented with abstraction as a university student. However, he only publicly affirmed abstraction as the ultimate form of modern painting after 1960, when Chen Jingrong (b. 1934), a co-founder of the Fifth Moon Group who insisted on the primacy of figurative representation, withdrew from Fifth Moon exhibitions and left for Japan for further study.

In early 1961, Liu Kuo-sung still felt that abstract painting was equally valid whether executed in oil or ink. Later in the same year, however, an architecture specialist colleague told him that “steel and reinforced concrete cannot be used to counterfeit traditional Chinese timber-frame architecture.” Inspired, Liu came to affirm the material specificity of a medium. From then on, he abandoned oil painting altogether and, as he put it, “returned to the world of paper and ink.” In the fifth Fifth Moon exhibition of 1962, Liu showed his first work of “abstract ink art” executed on *xuan* paper. Other members of the Fifth Moon Group, such as Chuang Zhe (Zhuang Zhe, b. 1934) and Fong Chung-Ray (Feng Zhongrui, b. 1933), responded with similar works. With poet Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong, 1928–2017) and calligrapher Léon Long-yien Chang (Zhang Longyan, 1909–2009) as interpreters and supporters, Modern Ink developed into the most prominent and influential art movement in Taiwan in the 1960s.

Taiwanese ink painters of the colonial period, such as Lin Yushan (1907–2004) and Guo Xuehu (1908–2012), practiced sketching from life. By the late 1950s, members of the Ton Fan Group, such as Hsiao Chin (Xiao Qin, 1935–), Hsiao Ming-Hsien (Xiao Mingxian, 1936–), Hsia Yan (Xia Yang, 1932–), Ouyang Wen-yuan (Ouyang Wenyuan, 1929–), and Li Yuan-chia (Li Yuanjia, 1929–1994), began to use a Chinese brush and ink to create paintings without images of real objects. Their works reflected the influence of Li Chun-Shan (Li Zhongsheng, 1912–1984), who stressed finding inspiration in tradition and folk culture, as well as that of Li’s own teacher Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita (Fujita Tsuguiji, 1886–1968). The Ton Fan group also drew inspiration from Sugai Kumi’s (1919–1996) theory of calligraphy, about which Hsiao Chin informed them in his letters from Europe. On the whole, however, the Ton Fan painters’ efforts were ad hoc experiments that did not cohere into a trend.

Yu Kwang-chung played a key role in formalizing the Modern Ink movement, specifically by writing several theoretical articles on Liu Kuo-sung and his fellow modernist ink painters, including “The Unadorned Fifth Moon” (*Pusu de wuyue*, 1962), “Ode to the Saddleless Rider” (*Wu'an qishi ge*, 1963), and “On from Clairvoyanism” (*Cong lingshi zhuyi chufa*, 1963). Nonetheless, we should not overlook the larger discursive context around the question of whether and how the ink tradition could effect a cultural “renaissance” (*fuxing*) and not merely a “return to antiquity” (*fugu*). [...] In August 1961, Xu Fuguan (1904–1982), a professor at Tunghai

University, ignited a debate over modern painting. Later in the same year, the Chinese Writers’ & Artists’ Association (Zhongguo wenyi xiehui) convened the Symposium on Modern Painting, in which scholars and painters of the traditionalist ink painting school expressed skepticism towards modern painting. By contrast, practitioners of Western painting of an older generation, such as Liao Chi-chun (Liao Jichun, 1902–1976), Lee Shih-chiao (Li Shiqiao, 1908–1995) and Sun Duoci (1912–1975), embraced modern painting and even began experimenting with it.

Although somewhat idiosyncratic, Liu Kuo-sung’s insistence on abstraction as the ultimate form of modern painting [...] helped to raise to the surface the issues of “liberation from figurative image” (*xingxiang jiefang*) and “renewal of technique” (*jifa gengxin*) in traditional Chinese painting. His call for a “revolutionary against the centered brush-tip” (*ge zhongfeng de ming*) was a call to abandon traditional *cun* techniques and avail oneself of more varied and more modern techniques and materials. In addition to incorporating Western abstract concepts into traditional Chinese painting, Liu advocated the splashed-ink (*pomo*) tradition of Tang and Song painters such as Wang Qia (8th century). It was Yu Kwang-chung, however, who systematically theorized the aesthetics of Modern Ink.

In early 1964, Liu Kuo-sung and Yu Huan-su (Yu Huansu, b. 1920) established the Modern Chinese Ink Painting Society (Zhongguo xiandai shuimo huahui). They would not achieve their purpose of promoting Modern Ink and organizing Fifth Moon artists into a collective movement. In October of the same year, an unrelated exhibition of Modern Ink paintings was held at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. Participating artists included Kuo Ming Fu (Guo Mingfu, b. 1950), Pang Tseng-Ying (Pang Zengying, 1916–1997), Liu Kuo-sung, Chuang Zhe, Wang Ruicong (b. 1926), Sun Ying (b. 1931), Tseng Pei-Yao (Zeng Peiyao, 1927–1991), Wen Ji (b. 1924), Shiau Ren-jeng (Xiao Renzheng, b. 1925), Liu Yong (1927–), and Wang Erh-chang (Wang Erchang, b. 1919). It is obvious that the concept of Modern Ink was gaining acceptance among an increasing number of painters outside the Fifth Moon Group. While abstraction was a motivating factor in their works, their more striking common trait was the desire to manifest an inner landscape and an interior vision.

In 1966, the Chinese-American art historian Chu-tsing Li organized The New Chinese Landscape, an exhibition that toured in the United States until 1968.

This gave the Fifth Moon painters international exposure. Indeed, soon thereafter three of them consecutively left Taiwan to promote their art in the U.S. The 1966 exhibition showcased to the rest of the world the experiments in Modern Ink by artists from Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora, including C.C. Wang (Wang Jiqian, 1907–2003); Chen Chi-kwan (Chen Qikuan, 1921–2007); the Fifth Moon painters Liu Kuo-sung, Chuang Zhe, and Fong Chong-ray; and Yu Chengyao (1898–1993), a hermit and former Kuomintang military general with a semi-mythical reputation.

These artists were not preoccupied with the dialectic between tradition and innovation that had dominated aesthetic thought since the Republican period. Instead, their foremost concern was forging their own personal paths through experimentation. To put this in more concrete terms: although these artists had firm foundational training in traditional ink painting, they used forms and idioms that were entirely non-traditional. At the same time, they did so in an attempt to forge a new art that was spiritually resonant with tradition.

In 1971, Liu Kuo-sung was invited to start a new course on Modern Ink Painting at the Department of Fine Arts of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The Taiwanese Modern Ink movement now expanded to the British colony. In 1981, Liu was invited to Beijing, where he participated in the celebration of the founding of the Chinese Painting Research Institute. Thereafter his works were exhibited in mainland China for the first time. In 1983, his first large-scale solo exhibition opened at the National Art Museum of China and subsequently toured Nanjing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Harbin, and other cities. In slide presentations associated with these exhibitions, Liu introduced Modern Ink throughout mainland China, stimulating widespread and enthusiastic discussion.

#### 4. The Unfolding of Modern Ink

Over the half-century since Liu Kuo-sung and his coterie gave rise to the abstract and experimental idiom of Modern Ink, it has continued to develop in Taiwan, becoming one of Taiwan's most significant contemporary artforms.

Yu Chengyao was the doyen of the postwar Modern Ink and a legend in Taiwanese ink painting circles. By repeatedly applying flat, dense, and circumspect brushwork, he constructed miraculous scenes of jagged mountains and precipitous valleys under sparse clouds. Also notable were Chao Chung-hsiang (Zhao Chunxiang, 1913–1991), who had sojourned in New York; Chen Yutao (Chen Yudao, b. 1918), a graduate of the Xiamen Fine Arts College; the architect Chen Chi-kwan (Chen Qikuan, 1921–2007); the potter Wu Hsueh-jang (Wu Xuerang, 1923–2013); and Hsia I-fu (Xia Yifu, b. 1925), who with detailed brushstrokes generates sublime and spiritually-charged realms. These artists began to experiment with Modern Ink on their own accord and for different reasons.

Abstract paintings were predominant within the Modern Ink practices of the 1960s, but many works also incorporated the calligraphic *bimo*. Aside from Liu Kuo-sung himself, artists who alluded to the classical landscape tradition included Shiau Ren-jeng, Liu Yong, Chao Chan-ao (Zhao Zhan'ao, b. 1932), Fong Chung-ray, and Lee Chung Chung (Li Chongchong, b. 1942). Fong Chung-ray would become a spokesperson for the Fifth Moon Group. Shiau, Liu, and Lee were the most important members of the Chinese Ink Painting Society (Zhongguo shuimohua xuehui) established in 1968. Chao Chan-ao, who lived in southern Taiwan, seldom took part in group activities. His desolate and barren painting style faithfully reflected his way of life.

While Liu Kuo-sung and other Fifth Moon artists were actively promoting Modern Ink, members of the Ton Fan Group, following their teacher Li Chun-shan's emphasis on the "Eastern Spirit," also produced modernist art in the ink medium. Early members of the Ton Fan Group included Hsiao Ming-Hsien and Ouyang Wen-yuan; Hsiao Chin and others joined later. However, the Ton Fan artists ultimately either gave up art altogether or turned to the medium of acrylic. In the early 1960s, Li Yuan-chia, whose practice was aligned with performance and conceptual art, created a series of avant-garde long scroll paintings with splattered ink blotsches.

In retrospect, it is clear that abstract ink painting as theorized and practiced by Liu Kuo-sung and other Fifth Moon artists has constituted the mainline of the Modern Ink movement and exerted the most far-reaching influence among the period's various experimentations. Many outstanding artists have developed their

own practices from Liu's and Fifth Moon's foundation, whether in agreement with or in opposition to it. Huang Chao-hu (Huang Chaohu, b. 1939), Lee Shi-chi (Li Xiqi, b. 1938), and C.Y. Lee (Li Zuyuan, b. 1938) explore the "planarity" of ink in a freer manner. Chu Ge (b. 1931), Guan Zhizhong (1931–1995), Yuan Zhan (b. 1941), and Lo Ching (Luo Qing, b. 1948) moderate the earlier generation's insistence on absolute abstraction by adopting poetic and culturally referential visual vocabularies. Gu Bing-sing (Gu Bingxing, b. 1941) deconstructs objects into the rhythmic compositions evoking modern architecture, taking ink art far away from stereotyped landscapes.

At its peak in the 1970s, Modern Ink in Taiwan was met with the countermovement of Nativism (*xiangtu yundong*), which critiqued Modern Ink for its insistence on pure abstraction, characterizing it as a kind of self-enchanted soliloquy alienated from the lived realities of Taiwan. Nevertheless, Modern Ink's modernist idioms and avant-garde spirit would continue to flourish into and after the 1980s, albeit with an increasing openness towards everyday experience. Representative of this shift among the second generation of Modern Ink painters is Hung Kenshen (Hong Genshen, b. 1946).

Hung's early works employed Liu Kuo-sung's modernist techniques and Ho Huai-shuo's immersive atmospherics. More recently, under the influence of Nativism, Hung has incorporated into his work themes illustrating a humanistic affection for Taiwan and its society. He has become the most dynamic practitioner and spokesperson for Modern Ink among the new generation of artists.

Yuan Chin-Taa (Yuan Jinta, b. 1949) started as a Nativist painter but freed himself from the dictates of realistic representation. Incorporating the concepts of Pop Art, he creates bold critiques of modern art. Among other artists of the same generation, Wang Su Feng (Wang Sufeng, b. 1948–) expresses a female self-awareness through her use of pink imagery, and Shih Wang-chen (Shi Wangchen, b. 1949) presents otherworldly, spiritual realms in the aesthetic of rubbings.

The next generation of painters, born during the 1950s and early 1960s, came of age around the end of martial law [in 1987]. Deeply influenced by Modern Ink of the 1960s and 1970s, these artists have helped to create the most diverse and vibrant cultural landscape of postwar Taiwan. Today, they are the primary drivers of Modern Ink.

[...] After the 1990s, with the great diversification of artistic expression and particularly the rise of installation art, Modern Ink has received less attention. Nonetheless, a considerable number of young artists continue to work in the ink medium, recognizing its manifold formal possibilities and cultural associations. Some combine ink with installation. Some distill ink to the consideration of tonality. Others respond to traditional masterpieces of ink art in digital media. Still others delve into the materiality of ink in search of visual forms that correspond to the world of the mind. [...] The efforts of these young artists demonstrate that Modern Ink remains a vital and thriving artform in Taiwan.

#### 5. Schools of Postwar Taiwanese Ink Art and the Contemporaneity of Modern Ink

Huang Kuang-nan (Huang Guangnan), [former] President of National Taiwan University of Arts, proposed a categorization of Taiwanese Modern Ink into "four schools, many forms" of literati painting:

- I. Classical literati painting, represented by Pu Xinyu (1896–1963) and his follower Jiang Zhaoshen (1925–1996).
- II. Romantic literati painting, represented by Chang Dai-chien (Zhang Daqian, 1899–1983), and the later master Cheng Shanhsiai (Zheng Shanxi, b. 1932).
- III. Realistic literati paintings, represented by Huang Chun-pi (Huang Junbi, 1898–1991) and Fu Juanfu (1910–2007). They advocated life sketching as a foundational process in painting. This school has the greatest number of followers.
- IV. Modern Ink Painting, or “New Literati Painting” (*Xin wenren hua*).

Huang Kuang-nan defines “Modern Ink Painting” (for him synonymous with “New Literati Painting”) as follows:

This school of painting originated under the influence of Western Abstract Expressionism popular during the 1960s, and constitutes one of the most vibrant art movements in Taiwan following its retrocession [i.e., the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945]. Modern Ink painters are receptive to Western art, and at the same time regard traditional Chinese painting as foundational training. Wishing to create freely, they refuse to cling blindly to traditional literati painting (in fact, they lack the time and mental energy to hone the requisite skills) and refuse also to adopt Western painting methods completely. They thus deploy certain symbols of modernity as new material for ink painting. This approach has found favor and support among young painters. Modern Ink painters wish to revolutionize the use of the brush. Abandoning traditional compositions, they used large ink blots and other techniques to interpret the aesthetics of ink painting. They consider themselves Eastern in spirit. They have received affirmation from art circles for their technical approach, which is close to automatism, and for their foundational theorization. They have formed a new trend. The works of Liu Kuo-sung, Chuang Zhe, Chu Ge, and Guan Zhizhong are quite unlike anything that came before.

Huang’s categorization is centered on the notion of New Literati Painting, which he equates with Modern Ink Painting. His view is perhaps debatable, but his description of Modern Ink Painting is accurate and affirmative.

It is true that in its initial stages, Modern Ink was distinguished by its borrowing from Western Abstractionism and experimentation with various materials and techniques. This approach was not without its critics. For example, Ho Huai-shuo, who came from mainland China via Hong Kong to study at the Department of Art of National Taiwan Normal University, published an article entitled “Chuantong Zhongguo hua piping” [Criticism of Traditional Chinese Painting] in 1965. Ho sharply criticizes the staid, codified habits of literati painting and its tenet that “calligraphy and painting share the same source” (*shuhua tongyuan*). At the same time, Ho also expresses strong skepticism towards abstraction as an objective for ink painting:

... Modern Chinese paintings that employ an abstract idiom strike me as very dull. For example, when I look at an artist’s works, I can picture all of them after looking at just one. The reason is that the paintings are afflicted with

a certain spiritual hollowness. They cannot be said to have independent lives of their own—in effect, each of them has no unique reason to exist.

Furthermore, Ho adduces Hegel’s view that the more an artwork depends on its material existence, the less valuable it is. For Ho, the various “production” or “fabrication” methods of Modern Ink artists, such as tearing, pasting, rubbing, mounting, printing, and dyeing, are nothing more than superficial displays of technique.

In 1966, Ho published another article entitled “Zhongguo hui-hua ruogan wenti zhi lunbian” [A Discussion of Several Problems in Chinese Painting]. Here he even more pointedly rebukes the views of Chuang Zhe and Liu Kuo-sung. He argues that if a painter wishes to manifest “national character” or “international character” (i.e. “contemporary character”), it is pointless for him or her to obsess over materials and tools. Rather, the real solution lies in broadening one’s intellectual horizon.

Fundamentally, Ho’s views are akin to the various calls to reform Chinese painting since the early 20th century. His own paintings likewise reflect this intellectual legacy. Chu Ge complimented Ho’s works in his 1964 solo exhibition, writing “the landscape paintings by the young artist Ho Huai-shuo reveal new directions and abundant creative potential. His diligence and willingness to experiment have injected hope into the dull and disorganized field of painting. Put simply, his work proves that the deep cultural foundation of Chinese painting can be a resource for creative innovation.”

Chu Ge also observes, “Ho’s paintings reveal many sources of influence, from the historical painters Shitao [1642–1707] and Bada [Bada Shanren, 1626–1705] to more recent artists such as Lin Fengmian [1900–1991], Fu Baoshi [1904–1965], Huang BinHong [1865–1955], and Li Keran [1907–1989]. However, in the composition and color, Ho’s works are most indebted to Li Keran’s.”

With his experience with painting reformation in the mainland and solid traditional training, Ho voiced powerful skepticism towards the abstract ink paintings that were dominant in Taiwan from the late 1960s to the 1980s. More than a function of Ho’s personal views, his opposition is more productively interpreted as an inevitable clash between two notions of artistic reform. Ho represents an intellectual lineage of reform movements grounded in traditional art and aesthetics and imbued with the literati values of cultivation and cultural continuity. By contrast, the Modern Ink movement of the 1960s was initiated by a group of young men who had come to Taiwan to escape war in mainland China. They were trained in Western painting but returned to Chinese culture in search of a point of connection between them, and in the process forged a new path for themselves.

Modern Ink as a concept has been defined and redefined in aesthetic theories and debates of the past decades. During the same period, it has also been instantiated, at times in different directions, in actual works of art. Take, for example, the older generation of artists such as Yu Chengyao, Chao Chung-hsiang, Chen Yutao, Chen Chi-kwan, and Hsia I-fu. Their dedication to Modern Ink had no direct connection to the movement championed by Liu Kuo-sung and the Fifth Moon painters in the 1960s. Their works had nothing to do with automatist techniques—tearing, pasting, scraping, rubbing, and such—of Liu and his circle. Nonetheless, both groups of artists rejected traditional *cun* techniques and *bimo* in favor of new possibilities.

The reverence for abstraction in the early phase of Modern Ink gradually became less rigid, as the movement itself came to include more diverse practices.

Modern Ink is not synonymous with Contemporary Ink [but is rather a subcategory of it, as discussed above]. Both an art theory and an art form, Modern Ink came into being at a particular time and under a particular set of historical conditions. As the foremost proponent of Modern Ink, Liu Kuo-sung has opened new possibilities for the ink medium in ways that are both highly experimental and resolutely contemporary.

Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), a long-time advocate of modern Chinese painting (*xiandai Zhongguo hua*) and an important supporter of Liu Kuo-sung and the Modern Ink movement, stated:

Let us create some exciting modern Chinese painting which, without “translation,” can amaze and delight viewers. This is the common wish of modern Chinese artists. Liu Kuo-sung and his colleagues have made some revolutionary efforts on the island of Taiwan to cultivate a new field for their works of art. Their battle cries should be heard by Chinese people in every corner of the world, and their worthy points should be echoed by Chinese artists across the land.

I have not read the statement of aims of the “Fifth Moon Group,” but from the paintings of Liu Kuo-sung I seem to hear such battle cries. He has learned techniques from Western painting, and he has inherited the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. To express his feelings he has adopted a wide variety of means and techniques, such as floating the ink on the surface of the paper, and pulling out

the coarse fibers of the paper to create special effects that are now closely associated with his style of painting. Liu Kuo-sung once talked about the fact that ancient Chinese artists often marked on their paintings that this painting was “made” by so and so. To me this word “made” shouldn’t be interpreted in the negative sense. I would prefer to judge the effort that went into a specific painting, be it “made” or “painted.” One of Mr. Liu’s major experiments is to create striking textural effects working with traditional Chinese paper, and he has apparently succeeded. Artistic effects should have no national boundaries; I would shout “Hurrah!” to any workable effect.

Ultimately, the most important revelation of Liu Kuo-sung’s Modern Ink art is not its liberation of painting from figurative images, or its technical innovations, or its pursuit of novel artistic effects. Rather, it is that Liu has sublimated the pulsating and free creative spirit behind “pure form,” in spite of the political and social turmoil of 20th-century China. Even more importantly, Modern Ink does not exist only as a theory or a concept, but has been instantiated in a large number of outstanding works of art, which further affirm ink painting’s status as a major artistic language of this era and an important cultural heritage for the future.

This article was previously published in Chinese as “Shuimo bianxiang—‘Xiandai shuimo’ zai Taiwan,” in *Yuzhou xinyin: Liu Guosong yi jiazi xueshu luntan* (Universe in the Mind: Proceedings of the Conference on Liu Guosong’s 60 Years), ed. The Palace Museum (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2009), 39–51, along with an unattributed English translation entitled “Ink-wash Transformation—‘Modern Ink-wash’ in Taiwan,” 52–75. The above is a substantially modified excerpt from the translation.

## Notes

- 1 See “Ti Shen Si’an ji jizhi” (poems commemorating Shen Guangwen’s literary anthology), *Zhuluo xianzhi* (Gazetteer of Zhuluo County), *juan* 1–1, reprint of original edition dated 1717 (Taipei: Economic Research Department, Bank of Taiwan, 1958), 133.
- 2 Zhu Shugui’s scroll paintings *Yueming shanzhong zhao gusong* (Moonlight over Ancient Pines in the Mountains) and *Gusong qishi zai shanzhong* (Ancient Pines and Strange Rocks in the Mountains) are in a private Taiwan collection. A plaque bearing his calligraphy reading “Weiling heyi” (“Numinously illuminated”) hangs at the Beiji Hall in Tainan. For more details, see Hsiao Chong-ray, ed., *Nan Taiwan shuhua yanji ji shuzihua jihua (1): Ming Qing shiqi* [Research and Digitalizing Plan for Calligraphy and Painting of Southern Taiwan, I: Ming and Qing Dynasties] (Jiayi: Thematic Research Projects, Taiwan Culture Research Center, Chung Cheng University, 2007).
- 3 Qin Lingyun (ed.), *Yangzhou bajia conghua* [Collected Stories of the Eight Painters of Yangzhou] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin meishu chuban she, 1985), 45; Mu Yiqin (ed.), *Mingdai yuanti Zhepai shiliao* [Historical Records on Zhe School Academic-Style Painters of the Ming Dynasty] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin meishu chuban she, 1985), 89–132.
- 4 Hsiao Chong-ray, “Minxi” yu ‘Taifeng’—dui Taiwan Ming Qing shuhua meixue de zai sikao” [“Fujian Customs” and “Taiwanese Style”: Reconsiderations of Painting and Calligraphy Aesthetics of Ming and Qing Taiwan], *Journal of the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (Taiwan meishu)* 67 (December 2006): 91–105.
- 5 [Translations from Confucius, *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2003), 149, 59.]
- 6 Wang Yao-ting (Wang Yaoting), *Cong Minxi dao xiesheng—Taiwan shuimo huihua fazhan de yiban shenmei renzhi* [From Fujian Customs to Sketching from Life: Common Opinions on the Development of Ink Art in Taiwan], in *Dongfang meixue yu xiandai meishu yantaojiu lunwenji* [Proceedings of the Symposium on Eastern Aesthetics and Modern Art] (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1992), 12.
- 7 Ibid., 126.
- 8 Ibid., 128.
- 9 In 1982, the Chang Liu Painting Society, which ceased after nine years, formed the Taiwan Glue Painting Association (Taiwan jiaocai xiehui) together with some painters based in central Taiwan. In the 37th Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition held in 1983, *jiaocai hua* became an independent category from *guohua* for the first time.
- 10 This misconception was widespread among the general public, including Liu Kuo-sung. See his “Why Include Japanese Style Painting Together with Chinese Style Painting?”, *United Daily News (Lianhe bao)*, November 12, 1954.
- 11 Hsiao Chong-ray, “Zhanhou Taiwan huatan de ‘zhengtong guoghua’ zhizheng” [The Debate on Orthodox Chinese Painting in Postwar Taiwan], originally published in *Diyi jie dangdai yishu fazhan xueshu yantaohui lunwen ji* [First Annual Academic Seminar on the Development of Contemporary Art] (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1989) and republished in Hsiao, *Taiwan meishushi yanjiu lunji* [Studies in the History of Taiwanese Art] (Taichung: Boya chuban she, 1991).
- 12 Hsiao Chong-ray, “Zhongguo meishu xiandaihua yundong yu Taiwan difangxing fengge de xingcheng—yige shi de chubu guancha” [The Chinese Art Modernization Movement and the Formation of Taiwanese Regional Style: Initial Historical

- Observations], first presented in the symposium “Tantao woguo jindai meishu yanbian he fazhan” [Exploring the evolution and development of our nation's modern art], organized by Penghu County Cultural Center, September 28-30, 1990, and republished in Hsiao, *Taiwan meishushi yanjiu lunji*.
- 13 See Chu-tsing Li, *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1969) and Hsiao Chong-ray, *Liu Guosong yanjiu* [A Study of Liu Kuo-sung] (Taipei: Taiwan Museum of History, 1996)
- 14 Liu Kuo-sung, “Huihua de xiagu” [The Narrow Valley of Painting], *Wenxing* 39 (January 1961), republished in his *Zhongguo huihua de lu* [The Path of Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Wenxing shudian, 1965), 115.
- 15 Ibid., 116.
- 16 Ibid., 117-119.
- 17 Ibid., 118-119.
- 18 Hsiao Chong-ray, *Wuyue yu Dongfang—Zhongguo meishu xiandai hua yundong zai zhanhou Taiwan zhi fazhan* (1945-1970) [Fifth Moon and Ton Fan: The Development of the Modern Chinese Art Movement in Postwar Taiwan (1945-1970)] (Taichung: Tunghai University Press, 1991), chapter 4, section 2, 257.
- 19 Liu Kuo-sung, “Chonghui wo de zhimo shijie—Wo chuangzuo shuimohua de jianku licheng” [Returning to the World of Paper and Ink: My Arduous Journey in Creating Ink Paintings], in his *Wo de diyibu* [My First Step], vol. 2 (Taipei: Shibao wenhua chuban jituan, 1979), 224-225.
- 20 Hsiao, *Wuyue yu Dongfang*, 257 and Shahi Li-Fa (Xie Lifa), “Liushi niandai Taiwan huatan de moshui quwei” [The interest in ink and water in Taiwanese painting of the 60s], *Xiongshi meishu* (*Lion Art*) 78 (August 1977): 40.
- 21 [“On from Clairvoyancism” is included in this *Reader*, 53-55.]
- 22 Hsiao, *Wuyue yu Dongfang*, chapter 5, section 2.
- 23 Yu Chengyao later became a painter represented by Lion Art Gallery (Xiongshi hualang). He was profiled as an “art-world legend” in *Lion Art* 189 (November 1986).
- 24 Huang Kuang-nan (Huang Guangnan), “Xiandai shuimohua leixing shilun” [An Analytical Discussion of the Categories of Modern Ink Painting], in *Chuantong-xiandai yishu shenghuo* [Tradition/Modern Art Living] (Taipei: National Taiwan Museum of History, 1997), 139-162.
- 25 Ibid., 152-153.
- 26 *United Daily News* (*Lianhe bao*), July 3, 1965, reprinted in Ho Huia-shuo (He Huaishuo), *Kuse de meigan* [The Beauty of Bitterness] (Taipei: Dadi chuban she, 1973).
- 27 Ibid., 194.
- 28 Originally published in *Zhonghua zazhi* [China Magazine], February 16, 1966, and reprinted in *The Beauty of Bitterness*.
- 29 Chu Ge, “Chuangzao yu liyi” [Creation and Intent], in *Shijue shenghuo* [Visual Life] (Taipei: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1968), 145.
- 30 Ibid., 147.
- 31 [Wu Guanzhong, “Unique, Dream-like, Metaphoric: On Liu Kuo-sung’s Retrospective Exhibition,” trans. Daniel S.P. Yang, in the exhibition catalogue *Liu Kuo-sung liushi huiguzhan* (The Retrospective of 60-Year-Old Liu Kuo-sung) (Taichung: Taiwan Museum of Art, 1992), 9. The essay is reproduced in this *Reader*, 134-135.]



*Autumnal Sounds  
Outside my Window,  
Dreams Within, 1995*  
Ink and color on paper  
67.72 × 40.75 in (172 × 103.5 cm)  
Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan



# LIU GUOSONG'S EXPERIMENTAL ART AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHINESE ART OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1996

At this moment, a mere five years before the close of the twentieth century, it is clear that Chinese society has undergone both extreme and unprecedented changes over the last one hundred years. Some reactive artists and politicians, seemingly responding to the rebukes of Westerners, have discovered as though overnight that the longstanding traditional culture of which they had been so proud is in fact an obstacle to their people's development, and have begun an intense fight with defenders of that tradition and its influence. The art world, existing as it does at the margins of ideology, has seen a protracted movement to remake tradition, initiated by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), and other social revolutionaries. Of course, in the previous century, artists living in dynamic and open treaty ports such as Shanghai also experimented by borrowing from the West; however, their innovations did not lead to an integration of art with the new currents in social thought to form an interactive whole. Since these artists found little use for theory, they did not form alliances with the broader academic world. In fact, in the course of Chinese history, twentieth-century painters constitute an anomaly in that their art has been hotly debated in the larger society and judged in the realm of public opinion.

The innovations in twentieth-century Chinese painting occurred under the constant pressure of social revolution. Those artists who participated in these experimentations seemed to believe that traditional Chinese painting—or one might say modern literati painting—was mired in an indiscriminate repetition of what came before, and did not reflect the present reality. By not developing along with the society, it had lost its lifeblood. However, some representative proponents of this view did not completely renounce all elements of the tradition; if nothing else, they continued to use some of the traditional tools and materials to produce their art. As they borrowed crucial intellectual concepts and expressive techniques from Western art of the nineteenth century and onward—from the works by key artists presented below, we can trace the influence of Realism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism, all the way to conceptual art and installation art—they simultaneously developed in their own individual directions and expanded the tradition in original ways. These artists' works generally leave one with a sense of disparate elements being tacked together with obvious seams, and their theories are not entirely convincing. Although we will not use traditional aesthetic rubrics to measure the success of their art, we cannot claim that they are completely divorced from tradition; moreover, if we take "transformation" to be the most valued quality in art, we must place these artists one by one within the larger history of Chinese art, and let them play their important individual roles. Were we to reject them completely, that would also steal some of the luster from those artists who worked in fresh ways within the entrenched tradition, such as Qi Baishi

(1864–1957), Huang BinHong (1865–1955), and Pan Tianshou (1897–1971).<sup>1</sup>

## I. A Few Crucial Projects to Transform Chinese Painting with Western Painting

The movement begun by Xu Beihong (1895–1953) and others to transform Chinese painting using Western realist modeling conceptions can be said to be the most socially influential and official example of experimental innovation in Chinese painting. From beginning to end, it never provoked any interference from the larger society.<sup>2</sup> The movement originally took art to be an aspect of social revolution, in what Kang Youwei and Chen Duxiu termed an "art revolution" (*meishu geming*). This entailed a re-envisioning of artistic concepts and styles; but these artists' achievements were quickly co-opted by politicians to serve the social revolution. Their experimentation was useful as a kind of constructive criticism directed toward the crude formulaic style of Chinese painting circles at the time. Although Xu Beihong's experimentation began with portraiture (at that time, the most ossified artistic forms were landscape (*shanshui*) and bird-and-flower (*huaniiao*) paintings), after he started using *bimo* ("brush-and-ink") to reinterpret Western drawings and borrowed from Ren Bonian's (1840–1896) painting style with its highly realistic components, he quickly turned his attentions toward animal and landscape painting (Fig. 1). This artistic project had a decisive influence upon traditional Chinese painting in mainland China from the 1950s to the 1970s. Li Keran's (1907–1989) landscape sketches and Fang Zengxian's (1931–) "Zhejiang figure paintings" can both be seen as continuations of this type of experimentation. It was not without risk: when lines of "poetic resonance" (*yun*) are forced to conform to the shapes of real objects, their function as the "bone method" (*gufa*) of the picture is necessarily weakened; the existence of one repudiates the existence of the other.

Liu Haisu (1896–1994), who was once as much of a golden boy of the painting world as Xu Beihong (1895–1953), borrowed from Western painting in a more modernist way. His paintings convey a potent sense of motion, and he seems to have discovered a correspondence between the intense colors and exaggerated modeling found in Impressionism and Fauvism, and the highly expressive lines of the Chinese freehand painting style (*xieyi hua*). First, he tried combining these elements in his oil paintings, and then went on to experiment with aspects of traditional Chinese painting. His aesthetic intuition was accurate and precise, but his experimental methods were crude. In his paintings using ink and color (Fig. 2), the strengths of both Chinese and Western painting ought to be given free rein, but instead end up mutually constrained. Layers of ink and paint weaken the expressive lines of freehand painting, because the charm of such lines only emerges against a relatively



FIG 1 Xu Beihong (1895–1952), *Grazing Horse*, 1932  
Hanging scroll; ink on bark paper. 20.5 × 14.75 in. (52.1 × 37.5cm).  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth,  
in memory of La Ferne Hatfield Ellsworth, 1986 (1986.267.192).  
Photo credit: Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Image source: Art Resource, NY



FIG 2 Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), *Trees and Figures*, approx. 1980–1990  
Ink and colors on paper, 11.75 in × 14.75 in (30 in × 37.5 cm)  
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of Barbara J. Myers, 1995.71  
Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

simple backdrop. Moreover, water-based paints do not saturate in the same way as oil-based paints do—especially when applied on *xuan* paper, which naturally “dampens” color—and so cannot compare to the vibrancy of an oil or even a watercolor painting. His exaggerated and stiff artistic style was never likely to appeal to the mainstream, but it also left room for professional criticism as well.

Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) appeared to be more scholarly than the previous two reformers. Although he made no major theoretical contributions, the style of his completed works makes it clear that he had a deep and comprehensive grasp of all the forms of traditional Chinese painting. He felt that traditional Chinese painting only valued formulaic display, and neglected the most basic elements of modeling. His understanding of Western art extended to Expressionism and Cubism, and he applied some of their vocabulary to create a new approach to Chinese folk art. His artwork does not fall easily within the categories of either “Chinese painting” or “Western painting.” His artistic style was distinct though highly flexible, and he seemed to be able to adapt any style to his purposes, all without losing the characteristic “poetics” of Chinese ink painting (Fig. 3). This was made possible not only by the breadth of his scholarly knowledge, but also by his industrious experimentation with the materials and effects used in ink painting. Lin Fengmian’s art was virtually unknown to the larger society, but in academic circles, he was even more highly regarded than either Xu Beihong or Liu Haisu.

While Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian may have borrowed from several different eras of Western modern art, their experimentation took place mostly during the 1930s and 1940s. With the beginning of the 1950s, Western modern art was criticized in mainland China as affiliated with bourgeois ideology. Any reforms in Chinese painting were essentially restricted to the style created by Xu Beihong. On the other hand, Pan Tianshou, who sought to innovate from within the Chinese painting tradition, found much success which in turn reinforced the tradition. In retrospect, Pan’s accomplishments appear to be a standalone case, and he did not leave his successors room for their own free expression. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, where the Kuomintang government had retreated, official policies were put into place dictating that cultural production was to be subservient to the political reality. All mainland cultural publications from before 1949 were confiscated, and most active participants in the Chinese cultural modernization movement had remained on the mainland. This meant that the Taiwanese modernist art movement had to start essentially from square one. When the younger generation of Taiwanese artists, Liu Guosong prominent among them, began to look toward reforming traditional Chinese painting, the artistic efforts of Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian to produce an “integration of East and West” did not offer a template. The severing from the tradition enforced by government policy proved in a certain sense to be a boon for Taiwanese artists. It caused Liu Guosong to focus his attention on Western Abstract Expressionism and on the first exhibition in Taiwan of landscape paintings from the Song dynasty (960–1279) in his pursuit of a “synthesis of China and the West.” It also meant that his creative projects surpassed—or one might say pushed forward—the experiments of Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian. Like his predecessors, Liu Guosong did not abandon theory in the midst of his artistic experimentation. Indeed, he borrowed from Western formal aesthetics, and developed a completely new analysis of traditional Chinese

**FIG 3** Gu Wenda (b. 1955)  
*Ox and Child*, 1983  
Ink on rice paper,  
4 ft x 2 ft (121.92 x 61.96 cm).  
Image courtesy of Gu Wenda,  
Hangzhou Studio



painting as regards compositional principles and notions of materiality. He brought the reforms in Chinese painting to their apex, and recast the aesthetic conceptions in Chinese thinking along the way.

At the end of the 1970s, the new generation of governmental leaders in China oversaw the end of policy restrictions, a critical juncture in the conversations between mainland artists and international art circles that led to an influx of new ideas via academia. Relying on a rich cultural repository, the younger generation of ink painters rapidly adopted all manner of Western modernist concepts to launch a reform offensive against the tradition. The most important contributor to this was Gu Wenda (1955–), then a young professor at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now the China Academy of Art).<sup>3</sup>

Gu Wenda went through several stages in his attempts to reform the tradition. He began by using the materials of traditional Chinese painting to manifest Western modernist (primarily surrealist) ideas (Fig. 4). For a time, he felt that Chinese painting constituted a unique material medium, but “no one could completely infiltrate Western modernism using this medium.” But in his ink paintings on *xuan* paper, Gu did manage to achieve the finest effects of seeping, interpermeation, and staining that the form allows. It is regretful that Gu never expressed any opinions about Liu Guosong’s experiments, even though Liu’s artworks had already made a considerable impact on the mainland at the time.<sup>4</sup> Less than two years later, Gu was once again using symbols and figures from traditional Chinese painting, and even adopted calligraphic marks as motifs, endowing them with ideological content. This caused some Western-leaning art critics to immediately associate his work with conceptual art. Of course, Gu Wenda’s experimentalism did not end there; he began to consider the environment itself as material, and thereby set about reconstructing the style, dimensions, and display of his art. He went so far as to use his own body in his work, constructing a truly astounding “meditation room” (*chanfang*) and pushing Chinese art reforms toward the arena of installation art. We will not discuss here whether his artworks truly have the qualities of installation, nor will we investigate whether they are significant in terms of a “synthesis of East and West.” It suffices to say that during this period, Gu Wenda went farther than any other artist in experimenting with Western modernism as a means of reforming traditional Chinese painting.



**FIG 4** Gu Wenda, *From #A-7 Dawn-Dusk Flying Pseudo-Characters in Landscape*, undated  
Splashed ink on rice paper, 132.01 x 58.98 in (335.3 x 149.8 cm)  
Image courtesy of Johnson Chang Tsong-Zung

Relying on these five artists—who essentially constitute three generations: Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian being the first; Liu Guosong the second; and Gu Wenda the third—to summarize the reformation of traditional Chinese painting under the impact of Western concepts may seem too schematic. But whether we focus on social influence or intellectual quality, it would be difficult to find other artists who match the achievements of these five. With this summary serving as a foundation, we can now discuss Liu Guosong's artistic experimentalism and its significance in more depth.

## II. Liu Guosong's Artistic Explorations: Background and Development

Compared to Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, and other early reformers of traditional Chinese painting, Liu Guosong carried out his experiments in a more complex cultural environment. Discussing Liu Guosong's art necessitates delving into Taiwan's regional culture and, based on that, Taiwan's modern art movement.<sup>5</sup>

If we acknowledge that the modernization of China was based upon Westernization and Japanese-style modernization, then we should also acknowledge that Taiwan's process of modernization preceded that of the mainland. The lack of geographical and political understanding between the two areas meant that after 1949, Taiwanese artists were faced with a situation unlike that of a series of contemporaneous mainland artists, and indeed unlike that of Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, and other earlier artists. The Kuomintang government loudly professed a desire to protect the purity and quality of Chinese culture, and attributed their defeat on the mainland to "an erosion of the original Chinese culture and an insidious destruction of the spirit of the people." Nevertheless, the official cultural bureaus were still under the control of intellectual holdovers from the "Japanification" efforts of the Japanese occupation. The Kuomintang slogans about purifying Taiwan's culture never became a reality. The case of the art world is especially striking. The annual "Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition" was made up of members of the Tai-Yang Art Association (Taiyang Meixie), whose tendency to support "Japanified" art forms and exhibitions led to attacks by traditionalist Chinese artists, especially those who came from the mainland in 1949. It also caused a young Liu Guosong to consider artistic issues from a historical perspective. This issue became a heavily politicized academic controversy that has not yet been properly dissected. "What was originally 'traditional Japanese painting' became known as 'traditional Chinese painting' under harsh, rigid, culturally regressive political pressure." In fact, looking at the ink paintings of Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), Feng Zikai (1898–1975), and others, along with newer works by the younger generation of mainland painters, we should recognize that something did indeed arise from the influence of "Japanese painting" on traditional Chinese painting. Gao Jianfu's bird-and-flower paintings benefited greatly from the painting style of Japanese artist Takeuchi Seihō (1864–1942). Moreover, while Gao maintained brush-and-ink effects and framing techniques from traditional Chinese painting, he also employed color application principles and an aerial perspective from Western painting. He expanded on Ju Lian's (1828–1904) "water collision" (*zhuangshui*) and "powder collision" (*zhuangfen*) techniques, and in the process augmented the color application methods of traditional Chinese painting. One might

say that Gao Jianfu was also a forerunner in the reform of traditional Chinese painting using techniques from Western realism. What distinguishes him from Xu Beihong is that while Gao basically introduced aerial perspective from Western realism, Xu introduced modeling concepts. (In "My View of Modern Chinese Art," Gao Jianfu proclaimed: "In addition to maintaining everything worthwhile in what has been passed down to us from antiquity, we also want to supplement that with modern scientific methods, like 'projection' (*touying*), 'perspective' (*toushi*), 'distance techniques' (*yuanjin fa*), 'illumination techniques' (*guangming fa*), and 'atmospheric perspective' (*kongqi fa*).<sup>6</sup> Gao Jianfu's emphasis on the specifics involved in producing a painting happens to coincide with Liu Guosong's later groundbreaking experiments.

In 1945, when Liu Guosong was a fourth-year student in the Fine Arts Department at Taiwan Normal University, he wrote an essay with the title "Japanese Painting Is Not Chinese Painting" (*Ribenhua bushi guohua*) in which he expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that the majority of works included in the "Chinese painting" section of the provincial exhibition were in fact "Japanese paintings," as well as the fact that "Japanese painting" was seen as an improvement over "Chinese painting." He also expressed his own views about the differences between Western painting, Chinese painting, and Japanese painting. Echoing an error of traditional painters at the time, in this essay Liu Guosong conflates the basic principles of "orthodox Chinese painting" and the rubrics involved in the slogan "develop the essence of national culture," with all its specific political implications. This was despite the fact that all along Liu intended to make art that transcended politics. Most significant here, however, is that although in the particular cultural atmosphere of the time this view was in line with governmental policies, the traditional standpoint of Liu Guosong and others on the outskirts of the art world became seen as radical and carried a rebellious social power.

If the dispute over "orthodox Chinese painting" led to a power struggle between the Taiwanese "Japanese-style painters" and the mainland "Chinese-style painters" who had moved to Taiwan, then what sparked the resentment of the younger generation of artists toward the older Japanese- and Western-style Taiwanese painters was the establishment of the Fifth Moon Group. A major figure in the Fifth Moon Group, Liu Guosong revised his positive appraisal of traditional Chinese painting, and felt that after the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, artists "just blindly copied, losing their forefathers' original intent to dive deep into nature and to use nature to evoke a sense of life." On the other hand, he also proposed to carry out a modernizing revolution in art, directed toward Abstract Expressionism: when he later carried this aim into his experiments to innovate Chinese painting, it established his place within the history of twentieth-century Chinese ink painting. With Liu Guosong and others pushing for modernization, Taiwanese expressionist painters (who had been considered the avant-garde in Taiwanese art circles and had a degree of social influence) found themselves left behind, while the clique of traditional painters was infuriated. According to cultural figures such as Xu Fuguan (1902/3–1982), advocacy of modern art was in conflict with governmental policy, and Liu Guosong and those of his ilk barely avoided having to wear the "red hats" that would symbolically brand them political traitors. Irrespective of this dispute, these artists' works ultimately were welcomed in those Western countries inclined to support the Taiwanese government, while

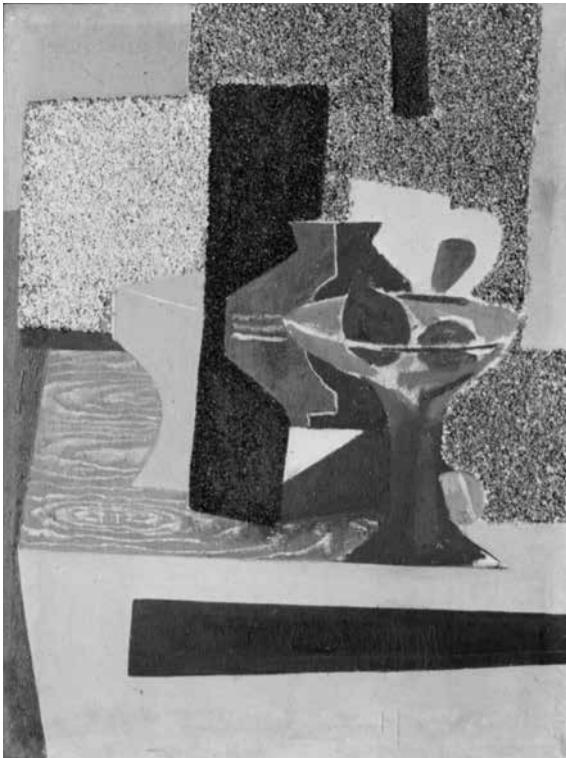


FIG 5 Liu Kuo-sung, *Work A*, 1956  
Mixed media, 27.17 x 22.05 in (69 x 56cm)  
Image ©The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation

the traditionalists' inattention to theory also helped pave the way for their success.

*Work A* (Fig. 5) is a collage made by Liu Guosong in 1956 for inclusion in the first Fifth Moon exhibition. The work closely adopts the expressive techniques of Cubism, and embodies Liu's artistic principles at that time. This act of "imitating the new" instead of "imitating the old" not only reflected Liu Guosong's outstanding qualities and rebellious spirit as a modern artist, but also reinvigorated Taiwanese painting. However, this tactic of indiscriminately copying from Western sources soon presented its rebellious practitioner with a quandary: "Certainly, we all have a feeling of loss, like we've gotten disoriented amid the two raging torrents of tradition and modernity"<sup>7</sup>. In 1959, the decision to leave the battle zone of Taipei for a position at Provincial Cheng Kung University (now National Cheng Kung University) in Tainan was pivotal for Liu Guosong. The peaceful and solitary environment offered him a chance to think and to nurture his desire to create a new artistic

style that would be "Chinese yet modern." From 1959 to 1961, Liu used Western materials and Abstract Expressionist techniques to produce an extraordinary series of paintings imbued with the characteristics of ink painting. Although Liu's artistic strategies during this period were perhaps influenced by Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, 1921–2013), these works clearly differ from Zao's in terms of their expressive forms. Liu's paintings primarily express a quality of unified atmospherics, similar to that of Song-dynasty landscape paintings, while Zao Wou-ki's work more often presents an effort to harmonize calligraphic or symbolic characters with abstract blocks of color.

From this period, we can observe Liu as a successful modernist painter demonstrating his daring and resourcefulness. As many scholars have pointed out, some young artists in Taiwan distanced themselves from the modernist school, bowing to the pressure of traditionalists and the browbeating of politicized public opinion. But Liu Guosong did not yield to that pressure. Neither did he abandon the rational consideration of intellectual issues just to maintain his hard-fought influence and power. If we contend that when Liu became aware in the late 1950s that opposing "complete Westernization" was just as important as opposing the blind imitation of tradition, this constituted a constructive act by a mature contemporary Chinese painter; then likewise, when Liu and Xu Fuguan engaged in an argument over promoting modernism at the beginning of the 1960s, this constituted a tactical "destructive" act by which Liu could rid his path of obstacles. Liu always remained completely clear on this point. He understood that his art had to be constructed within an open, democratic society, and only then would its true social value be revealed. Liu maintained his academic disposition when fighting back against traditionalist conceptions that had been co-opted by narrow political interests. This also made his renewed calls for a "national character," at least in terms of public opinion, seem all the more erudite.

Contemporary architectural aesthetics, which emphasizes the expressive qualities of a given material in and of itself, sparked Liu Guosong's experiments with using oil paint to achieve the effects of ink painting. When Liu once again picked up the tools of traditional ink painting, it heralded the beginning of a period during which he strove to expunge the traces of Abstract Expressionism from his work. In his works from 1964 and 1965, Liu finally established his own individual artistic strategy, and felt his way toward a complete set of expressive methods and techniques. These paintings, which are imbued with both creative fervor and a sense of tranquility, do more than merely cast off the imitation of Western



FIG 6 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Image of Fleeting Time*, 1965 (detail)  
Handscroll, ink and colors on paper, 21.5 x 236 in (54.6 x 600 cm)  
Collection of Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Museum purchase, B68D17  
Image ©The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation

modernist painting and traditional Chinese painting; instead, they present an intrinsic concord between the two styles. Analyzing the paintings *Wintry Mountain Covered in Snow, White Clouds on Peaks, The Image of Fleeting Time* from this period, Chu-tsing Li writes:

[Liu] used specially produced rough cotton paper and a very large brush. Black ink predominates, though he added some touches of color, mostly traditional Chinese water color.

Sometimes Liu also painted on the reverse side of the paper. Some of the ink strokes would soak through to the front of the painting. Then, after painting some large, free-swinging strokes on the front, he used his special technique of plucking the heavy fibers from the surface.

In this way he created many beautiful textures in paintings which expressed the power and beauty of traditional Chinese landscape paintings. One can see images of footloose clouds and babbling streams which transport the viewer to the Yellow Mountains, the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River, or even up to the lofty reaches of Himalayas. These paintings seem to fly over the earthly hustle and bustle and carry one to a remote, beautiful paradise. This special feeling of transcendence in Liu's painting was inherited from the ancient masters of Chinese landscape painting.

Liu's means of expression are completely different from the ancients. They are fresh and new, and abstract. They share the same beauty with Abstract Expressionism even if sung with a different voice. Jackson Pollock's works represent the pinnacle of Abstract Expressionism; Liu's paintings are the highest expression of the melding of Eastern and Western art.<sup>8</sup>

Li also quotes the American critic John Canady's praise for Liu Guosong as "a dashing exponent of traditional Chinese landscape painting hybridized with modern abstraction."<sup>9</sup> In the mid-1960s, Liu won international acclaim, and cast aside any anti-intellectual anxiety from the myriad social pressures. One might say that his artistic significance had already surpassed the confines of Taiwan's modern art movement, and now represented a major turning point in the history of twentieth-century Chinese painting.

In terms of the development of Western modern art, Liu Guosong's Space Paintings, created in the late 1960 and early 1970s, are perhaps the most meaningful. The visual spectacle of the Lantern Festival at Lung-shan Temple in Taipei in early 1969 reminded Guo of Op-art. Inspired by the Apollo 7 space mission, which traveled to the moon and photographed the earth and the moon from that angle, he soon entered his second peak period of creativity: his Space Painting Period. In these works, he synthesized even more expressive and stylistic techniques: collage, spray painting, rubbing, brushstrokes, color application, and the crumpling, peeling, and wrinkling of the paper. With a simple, distinct style, Liu found a perfect amalgam of classical Eastern aesthetic sensibility and contemporary Western art concepts and scientific culture. This style won him the first prize at Mainstream '69 [the Second Annual Marietta College International Competitive Exhibition for Painting and Sculpture] in the United States, turning him into a truly international painter.

Liu's Space Paintings gradually evolved into a more Hard-edge style, which brought them closer to Western painting, contrary to the artist's own expectations. Although this garnered Liu Guosong international praise unlike any previously afforded to a Chinese painter, it also brought new vexation. To this explorer committed to building a new tradition for Chinese painting in the twentieth century, such success represented a departure from his original goal. He was bound to look back on the footprints he left on the era of the 1960s with consternation. With the mindset of a contemporary cultural figure, he had to develop a new understanding of the inexhaustible tradition of Chinese landscape painting. In the mid-1970s, Liu experimented with "water rubbing" (*shuituo*), and yet again brilliantly expressed the dreamlike, poetic cosmology of Eastern thinking. With these peaceful yet lively paintings, he finally left the eye-dazzling Western modernist art movement, and returned at a higher level to the Chinese landscape painting tradition.

For the next decade, Liu Guosong essentially abandoned the Taiwanese avant-garde art movement. His art was limited to the realm of ink painting, and his style and artistic conception never changed in terms of overall strategy. Only his expressive methods showed more experimentation, as he imposed a kind of rationality on the spontaneity of his rubbing techniques. In the late 1980s, Liu invented another unique technique he called "steeped ink" (*jimo*), again broadening the range available in *xuan* paper and ink.



FIG 7 Liu Kuo-sung, *Forest of Ice Pagodas*, 1990

Ink and color on paper, 12.01 x 37.01 in (30.5 x 94cm)

Cheng Huai House Collection, Taiwan

painting. In *Prairie Fire and Forest of Ice Pagodas* (Fig. 7), we no longer find the cloudlike gossamer threads of the “water rubbing” period, nor do we find the vigorous textures of the “plucked tendons, stripped skin” (*choujin bopi*) technique. Instead, tightly juxtaposed blocks of color and ink now infiltrate each other’s territory. Over time, Liu Guosong’s artistic explorations penetrated more deeply into the spontaneity of the world. Whether in his water rubbings or steeped-ink paintings, the spontaneity of the medium was restricted to localized effects, and his compositions overall always maintained a sense of rational arrangement.

### III. The Significance of Liu Guosong’s Art

We can approach the question of the significance of Liu Guosong’s artistic experimentalism from three angles: traditional Chinese painting, Western modern art, and new Chinese painting.

#### 1. THE CONNECTION WITH TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTING

Liu Guosong’s position within the history of Chinese ink painting has been determined by his two different approaches to the tradition: one of critique and the other of inheritance. In his theoretical approach, he used modernist aesthetic theory as a critical tool to reassess the tradition. With this kind of interpretive framing, he was able to pinpoint the reasons behind the decline of modern Chinese painting, as well as provide himself with a theoretical basis for his own experimentation. In his experiments, he directly addressed the vast world by manipulating the images both consciously and unconsciously, reinterpreting the type of poetic background found in Fan Kuan’s (c. 960–c. 1030) landscapes. With this reinterpretation, he established his artistic intent, maintaining his distance from Western modern art and launching himself as a clear successor to the new Chinese painting tradition.

1) During the “Modern Ink Painting” revolution of the 1960s, Liu Guosong pointed out that the brush-and-ink method that literati painters were once again promoting could be expounded by more fundamental aesthetic principles: “Brush’ (*bi*) refers to the marks left behind on the canvas via contact with the brush. “Ink” (*mo*) refers to the effects of tonality and diffusion created by ink on paper. In contemporary terms, “brush” is “point and line,” and “ink” is “color and plane.” From this, Guo made an argument for what he called a “revolution of the centered [brush]-tip” (*ge zhongfeng de ming*):

From the development of Chinese and Western art, we know that points, lines, planes, and color can all be employed as different tools, activated through the use of materials and techniques. It is not the case that one must use a brush. The brush is just one expressive tool among many, while the centered tip in the context of painting has a limited expressive breadth. This inspired what I term a “revolution of the centered tip.” Although the brush is an excellent tool in painting, it has already been used by ten thousand artists over the last millennium. The variations and effects it can produce have long since been exhausted [...] Chinese painting needs a bold revolution and rehabilitation; we urgently need to break free from the cage of classical “brush-and-ink” (*bimo*).<sup>10</sup>

He also pointed out a second crucial reason behind the decline of Chinese painting, namely the repetition of stale “texture strokes” (*cunfa*):

Texture strokes have trapped too many Chinese painters. When traditional painters pick up a brush, it’s all still about the “hemp-fiber” (*pima*), “unraveled-rope” (*jiesuo*), and “axe-cut” (*fupi*) texture strokes. These old techniques have been used for a thousand years, but how many people have really thought about the basic meaning of *cun*? If you want to describe it in contemporary terms, it means “texture.” If Chinese painters could “unravel ropes” of “hemp fiber,” they would suddenly discover that to produce textures, they do not need a brush, nor do they even need to “paint.” Any given tool or technique can create “textures,” and different tools and techniques will create different “textures,” which with practice can become exceedingly expressive. Texture is produced by a combination of points, lines, surface, and color. Modern artists attach particular importance to it, as did painters who preceded the Song dynasty. Only the self-professedly amateur literati painters after the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) thought it was unimportant. They were not professional artists, and they did not spend the majority of their time refining their art; rather, when they had a break from official duties they would pick one of those classical “texture strokes” and have fun playing around with it. After a long time, such referential play became codified into a style, impeding true innovation. There was just repetition for six or seven hundred years, and that crushed the vitality of Chinese painting.<sup>11</sup>

Liu Guosong’s critique of the tradition was more incisive than that of his predecessors. Xu Beihong’s criticism of traditional Chinese painting had to do mainly with figuration, and he did not really touch upon the issue of brush-and-ink; that is to say, he was still uncritically carrying the brush-and-ink tradition forward. He did not concern himself with texture strokes either, since there were few applications for such patterns in his “realistic” painting style. Lin Fengmian’s criticism of traditional Chinese painting was also directed toward figuration. At the National Beijing Fine Art School, he advocated for a painting department that encompassed both Chinese and Western art, but which was in fact premised upon the notion that Western painting was more scientific than Chinese painting. He believed that Western art training was directed toward basic concepts of figuration, while Chinese art training focused on patterns, and as such Chinese painters lacked the ability to depict basic objects. When modeling—or one might say composition—becomes privileged above other elements of painting, then an artist’s individual style is established on the basis of the production of many different kinds of patterns. (Composition here is threefold: (1) the dissection or construction of the internal structure of an object; (2) the compositional relationship between the internal structure and the geometry of the external structure; (3) the compositional relationship between the geometry of the object and the picture as a whole.) This differs from traditional Chinese painting, which views the individualization of *bimo* as the most important element of style. For later Chinese literati painters, the patterns were just a vehicle with which to display one’s own individualized *bimo*, and the key to the development of one’s style was variations in that *bimo*. They viewed calligraphy the same way: for literati painters, to change the patterns in order to express individual ideas was as inconceivable as a calligrapher inventing new Chinese characters to express individual ideas. In his experiments with traditional Chinese painting, Lin Fengmian did not

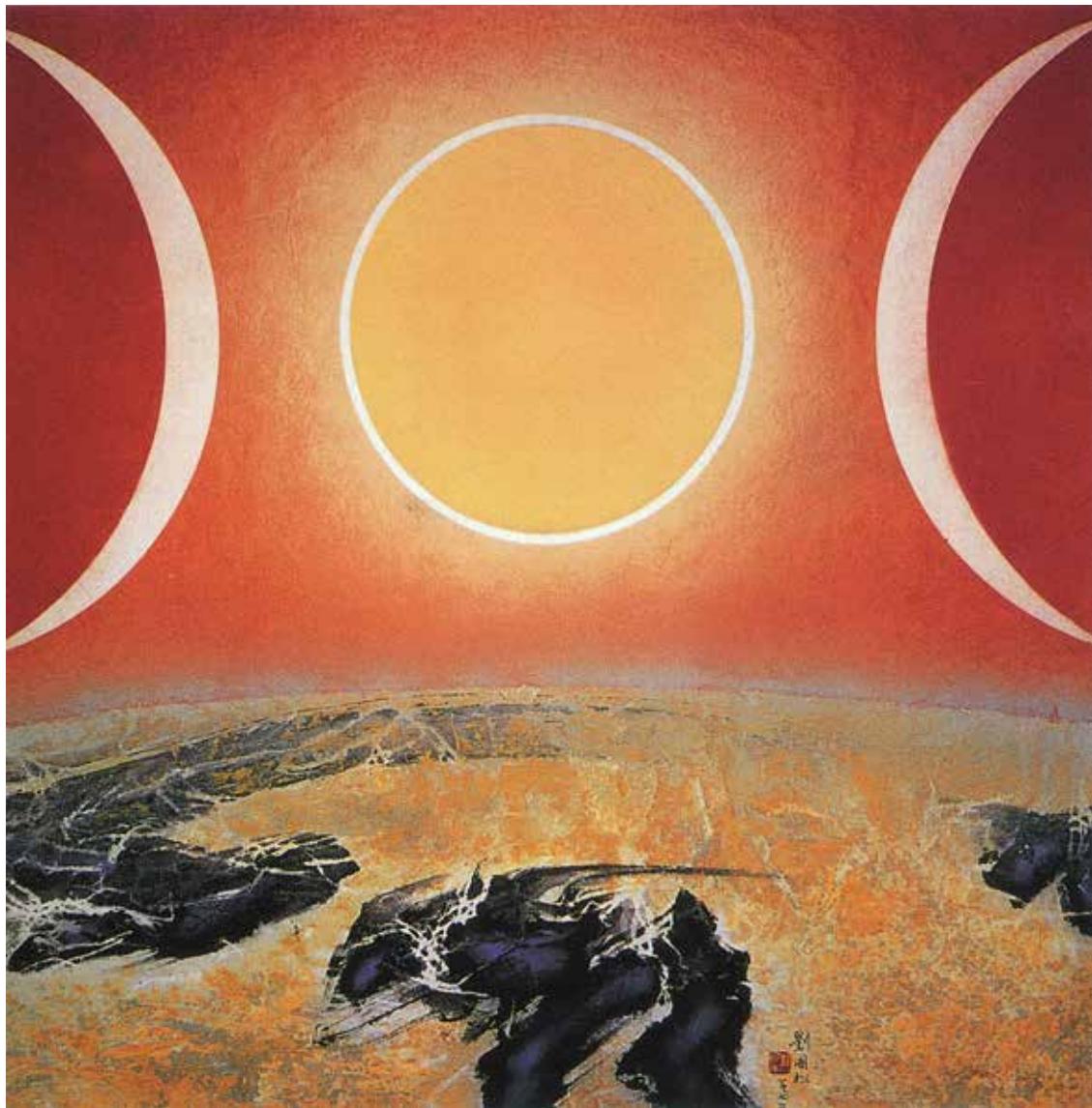


FIG 8 Liu Kuo-sung, *High Noon*, 1972  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 35.83 x 36.22 in (91 x 92 cm)  
Image ©The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation

consider the issue of *bimo*. The lines of his paintings sometimes come to resemble those created by a bamboo or quill brush, though here they are used to produce outlines and contours. Borrowing from theories of abstract art, Liu Guosong managed to bring a modern interpretation to the *bimo* of traditional Chinese painting, thereby providing a new angle from which to understand the tradition (this new angle eliminated the question of individual personality from *bimo*). This also served as art-historical support for his interpretation of Shi Ke's (10th century) abstract, "mad cursive" (*kuangcao*) brushwork (liberating brushwork from a reliance on formulaic objects so it could become a self-sufficient form).

Liu Guosong's own *cunfa* [hereafter rendered "texture methods" in distinction from traditional "texture strokes" since Liu does not always rely on brushstrokes] can be seen as a pragmatic addition to the modern interpretation of *bimo*. That is to say, his "texture methods" were just expressive techniques taken from the renditions of mountains and rocks found in traditional landscape paintings (although admittedly some bird-and-flower painters and portrait painters did also derive certain brush methods from the various landscape "texture strokes"). The "texture strokes" of landscape paintings were intended to create obvious distinctions

between the textures of objects; this is different from the "texture" of Western painting (that is, variations in the quality of the painting surface). Consequently, to call "texture strokes" as employed in landscape paintings a type of "texture" is not entirely appropriate. Of course, Liu Guosong did directly manipulate the texture of his surfaces, using for example his "plucked tendons, stripped skin" technique, and even more so, making collages from different types of paper. This direct manipulation of the painting surface to produce "texture" is intrinsically different from the "obvious distinctions" produced by the "texture strokes" in traditional landscape paintings, although there are some similarities in how they appear to the eye. When Liu Guosong "interpreted the classics to support his own views," it was a way of encouraging himself during his experimentation. Moreover, through these experiments, people did gradually accept the effects of "fabrication" in ink paintings, something Liu's predecessors such as Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian never attempted.

2) Liu Guosong's experiments with abstraction always employed cosmic imagery of the type found in Fan Kuan's work. One could claim that Liu's experiments with abstract painting were not as comprehensive as that of Western painters. Anyone standing in

front of one of his paintings will inevitably be projected into a landscape. If we take Fan Kuan and Li Cheng as exemplars of Song painting, and Dong Qichang as representative of Ming painting, then a certain categorical distinction starts to take shape: Song painters concentrated on constructing "hills and valleys," while Ming painters concentrated on the qualities of the *bimo*. Liu Guosong's critique of traditional Chinese painting seems to be based on just such a set of categorizations and assumptions; Liu repudiated the efforts of the Ming painters. Indeed, Chinese painting after the Ming dynasty was stultified in terms of composition, as though Ming painters were merely making abstract versions of the Song painters' "hills and valleys." All these "hills and valleys" and "brush and ink" sometimes lead to the feeling that "you can't have your cake and eat it too." We seem to be able to say that for Fan Kuan, *bimo* were merely tools to produce "hills and valleys," and that for Dong Qichang, "hills and valleys" were merely a vehicle for the expressive power of *bimo*. The modern artists Huang BinHong and Pan Tianshou worked to fully utilize both "hills and valleys" and "brush and ink," but the result was that Huang BinHong excelled at *bimo* while Pan Tianshou had an affinity for "hills and valleys." When we admire "hills and valleys," an "associative" aesthetic mechanism takes precedence. When we appreciate "*bimo*," the aesthetic mechanism becomes one of "internal imitation." With Fan Kuan, viewers more often experience the scene, drawing on the poetic backdrop to associatively experience a sense of "humans as an integral part of nature." With Dong Qichang, however, the relaxed and nimble *bimo* are suggestive of Zen, and directly transform into an aspect of "humans as an integral part of nature." Overall, the traditional Chinese painting concept of "humans as an integral part of nature" can only be understood within a particular cultural context.

Compared to traditional Chinese painting, Liu Guosong more directly expresses a consciousness of the vast universe and the limits of the concept of humans as an integral part of nature.

When discussing his own art, Liu Guosong often mentions the profound impression that Fan Kuan's *Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams* left on him; he also talks about his extensive travels, and especially the influence mountain climbing had had on his "abstract landscape painting." Chu-Tsing Li believes that Liu uses "*bimo* [to] elevate all things to a higher plane which transcends our daily areas; one enters a new and peaceful Chan/Zen territory, a heavenly realm where both the material world and oneself are forgotten."<sup>12</sup> Although Lang Shaojun does not sense the "Zen realm" that Li does, he still clearly experiences the "harmonious beauty and tranquil serenity, and the sense of humans as an integral part of nature, which are obviously derived from traditional landscape paintings."<sup>13</sup>

It is difficult to say whether Liu Guosong creates this realm where humans are an integral part of nature and the boundaries between the self and the world are forgotten, or whether we project this feeling upon his images (I believe that the "realm" of Liu Guosong's work can be likened to the way Neo-Confucian scholars abroad "interpret the classics to support their own views"). However, it is evident that Liu Guosong's images are abstractions of the landscapes of the Song painters, and after the paint and colors are applied, the works are even more primal and boundless. The effect leads us to associate the paintings with the "universe" we glean from photographs. In works from Liu's Space Painting Period in particular (Fig. 8), this kind of association becomes even more immediate. (Chu-Tsing Li feels that Liu Guosong's experiments

here reconnect traditional Chinese painting with the contemporary era, and that Chinese painting after the Song and Yuan was not relevant to the era in which it was created. I am unclear as to why Li believes that Chinese painting before the Song and Yuan was relevant to a particular era, especially with respect to the genre of landscape painting). On this point, Liu's goals of pushing the boundaries of Eastern art are the same as oil painter Zao Wou-ki, although they go about it in different ways. If one compares Liu's art of this period to that of his predecessors, the import of Liu's rethinking of the Chinese painting tradition is all the more obvious.

## 2. THE CONNECTION TO WESTERN MODERN ART: BORROWING AND LEARNING

One could summarize Liu Guosong's decades of artistic experimentation in the following manner: in the 1950s, he imitated Western modern art from Cubism on (and opposed the Japanese Impressionist school and the traditional Chinese painters who had come to Taiwan from mainland China); in the late 1950s, he returned to the East by way of Abstract Expressionist oil painting (and opposed both the Eastern tradition and the Western modernist school); in the mid-1960s, he used materials drawn from traditional Chinese painting to carry out experimental forays into abstract art; in the late 1960s, he integrated Western Hard-edge painting and Op Art with calligraphic lines to depict the landscapes of outer space; in the mid-1970s, he strove both to control and to unleash all the different serendipitous effects of the ink painting medium.

An overview of Liu Guosong's several decades of artistic experimentation shows that he has consistently maintained an attitude of learning and borrowing from, but not participating in, Western modernism. Although honored at some significant international exhibitions, Liu basically emerged as an Eastern modernist painter. He borrowed from the most avant-garde artistic movements in the West, along with their techniques (such as Abstract Expressionism and Hard-edge painting), but he never joined them. He even expressed a suspicion of his fellow painters' pursuit of the fad of hyperrealism, and counseled them against it. In the 1950s, he settled on the goal of maintaining a certain distance from Western contemporary art. "By the time of the third Fifth Moon Group Exhibition in 1959, I had already come to realize the impossibility of a complete Westernization of modern art, and knew that we shouldn't just blindly follow the currents of Western modernity. Doing so would violate the spirit of modern art. The validity of this was proven to me seven years later when I was in New York. At the end of 1966, Japan and America had a joint contemporary art exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I received invitations to participate in several unveiling parties for the 'Japanese Painting and Sculpture Exhibition.' Only after I'd taken a look at what was there did I realize that nearly all of the works on display were just imitations of Western modern art. Afterward, John Canady, a well known art critic at *The New York Times* wrote a bruising review subtitled "What's New at the Modern? Not Much These Days," in which he says that the exhibition should have been called 'the revival of a stale old corpse.'<sup>14</sup> Liu Guosong always intended to bring a renewed Chinese tradition into dialogue with Western modern art, but with the sole goal of critiquing and remolding the tradition. Liu's approach was in keeping with Western modern art, particularly contemporary art, but the issues raised in his work were quite removed from Western modern art.

From a sociological perspective, Western modern art, and especially contemporary art, has always seemed to interpose itself into the cultural realities of its time. The themes of Western contemporary art essentially revolve around alienation, the subconscious, sex, religion, politics, and other issues of universal significance. It embodies the psychological ambivalence and love-hate relationship people have toward industrialized civilization. The cultural backdrop for Liu Guosong's artworks, however, has always been the question of the value of traditional Chinese culture in contemporary society, which is distinct from the central issues of Western art. Overall, in the view of Han Bao-de, the director of Taiwan's National Museum of Natural Science, Liu Guosong's generation of reformist artists "didn't engage with social issues. They learned from Western artists how to make noise, and attempted to reform society by reforming art. They railed against the tradition as hypocritical, overly romantic, and sentimental, and thought that carrying on that tradition would only make artists even more romantic, and even more disconnected."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, from the angle of the Western modernist cultural movement, Liu Guosong's "standpoint doesn't seem very revolutionary from today's perspective."<sup>16</sup> Liu's Space Painting Period was the only period in which he directly reflected contemporaneous motifs, but he quickly transformed the technological content back into eternal poetic themes. He regarded Western art as a tool he could borrow and learn from, but discarded its cultural specificity. Even his most abstract ink paintings are landscapes that only leave viewers guessing, and do not, as Western abstract art does, make them feel confronted with nothing but form itself. If one claims that a viewer can sometimes acquire specific images from such art, that is entirely dependent upon the individual's psychology, rather than the object itself offering up anything specific.

### 3. THE CONNECTION WITH THE CHINESE PAINTING TRADITION: PROGRESSION

If we see the development of art as a way of solving history's questions, we will find that we have trouble placing many innovative works of twentieth-century Chinese ink painting along a single trajectory. At the beginning of this article, we established the idea of Western modern art as a vehicle to reform Chinese painting. At the same time, Fu Baoshi, Shi Lu (1919–1982), Li Keran, and others from various periods also looked to Japanese, Soviet, and other country-specific mainstream art practices to engage with the issue of how Chinese painting should be reformed, and thereby came into contact with many useful painting styles. For example, the realistic landscape paintings of Fu Baoshi (1904–1956) and Li Keran from the late 1950s and early 1960s served to broaden the range of subjects available to traditional painting.

Under the banner of bringing forth new ideas in Chinese painting, Pan Tianshou's artistic experiments are perhaps even more noteworthy. Pan brought the traditional aesthetic style of "magnificence" to its ultimate achievement. His paintings were rich in individual character, but the style was taken wholesale from a refinement of traditional Chinese painting techniques. Although he opposed the style of the famous "Four Wangs," he seemed to adopt their idea of the "Great Synthesis," except that he extended that "synthesis" to encompass painting styles that the Four Wangs had rejected. Pan believed that traditional Chinese painting (in truth, literati painting) had not been developed to its full potential, and he strategically "kept his distance" as much as possible from Western art in his experimentations. As in the traditional literati

paintings, Pan took *bimo* as the primary concern in painting, but his art is most affecting in terms of the "marvelous" and "remote" scenes it presents. He also took poetry, calligraphy, and seals to be essential aspects of a painting. In the end, Pan's type of experimentation never actually diverged from the traditional forms or artistic concepts.

Given the preceding analysis, we can see that of the early painters to use Western painting to reform Chinese painting, Lin Fengmian went the furthest. Xu Beihong not only exhaustively preserved the traditional *bimo* techniques in his new Chinese paintings, but also often left large empty spaces in his paintings for calligraphic inscriptions of poetry and prose. Many of Liu Haisu's new garden paintings are also inscribed with poems and impressed with seals. Although in Liu's paintings *bimo* are intermingled with the "brushstrokes and colors" of oil paintings at the expense of their intrinsic qualities, discerning viewers can still instantly see their intimate connection with tradition. As previously mentioned, in Lin Fengmian's paintings, the lines seem to be made by a bamboo or quill brush, but no longer try to lend any sense of calligraphy. In terms of composition, Lin broke away from the traditional use of empty space. Of course, the most useful aspect of Lin Fengmian's work was the way he successfully imported color from Western painting into Chinese ink painting. In Liu Haisu's work, garish colors and ink are juxtaposed closely in a kind of collage, while in Lin Fengmian's paintings, ink and color form an organic whole.

Liu Guosong essentially adopted Lin Fengmian's artistic mode, but, as I have shown above, he borrowed more avant-garde Western modernist art concepts to push Lin's strategy even further. He paid more attention to the material effects in ink paintings, and tried many different methods to manipulate his paintings' surfaces. His paintings seemingly revolve around images of "the sun and the moon," "mountains and rivers," and "clouds and mist." In Lin Fengmian's paintings, we find that although they transform the stale patterns of the earlier literati paintings, in scope and feeling they most resemble those modest renditions of wintry forests of the Yuan dynasty, albeit without the sense of a winter wasteland and with more human warmth. To a certain extent, their flavor is closer to that of Tao Yuanming's (365–427) pastoral poetry. Liu Guosong's landscape paintings maintain the spirit of Song monumental landscapes while also eliminating from them the possibilities of imaginative "wandering" (*keyou*) and "living" (*keju*). As a result, Liu raises Chinese painting to a nearly conceptual level, with rich metaphysical implications. Lin Fengmian and Liu Guosong seemingly manage to separate the poetic feeling and the philosophical implications that were completely interwoven in traditional Chinese landscape paintings. Of course, compared to Western modern art, the metaphysics of Liu Guosong's art also leans toward a kind of rich poeticism; while in traditional paintings such poeticism is suggested by actual lines of poetry, Liu Guosong expresses it directly through his visual images.

Liu Guosong's other great contribution, which distinguishes him from Gao Jianfu, Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, and Lin Fengmian, was to bring a relatively rational and analytical spirit to the modern art movement. Regardless of how pragmatic or reaching his personalized interpretations of *bimo* and "texture strokes" were, his ideas had a kind of logical force as theory, and moreover eliminated mundane sociological content as well.

Unlike his predecessors—or even his contemporaries—in mainland painting circles, Liu Guosong's creative experiments in

Chinese painting unfolded in the international art world, and this allows us to approach his art and its significance from a multiplicity of angles. It is perhaps most appropriate to analyze his art within the context of the transformations traditional Chinese painting underwent when it came into contact with Western concepts. This approach also comes closest to Liu Guosong's own strategic objective: to establish a new Chinese painting tradition, one that can communicate with Western art on a level playing field.

(Translation by Eleanor Goodman)

This essay was previously published in Chinese as "Liu Guosong de yisuh shiyan tji qí zai ershi shiji Zhongguo meishushi shang de yisi" in *Liu Guosong yanjiu wenxuan* [Selected Essays on Liu Kuo-sung], ed. Chun-yi Lee (Li Junyi) (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1996), 121-137.

## Notes

- 1 For more information about Pan Tianshou and others' plans to reform Chinese painting, see Huang Zhan and Yan Shanchun's chapter "Jiazhi de zhongjie yu tushi de zhuanhuan—Pan Tianshou yanjiu" [The End of Value and the Transformation of Form: A Study of Pan Tianshou] in their *Wenrenhua de quwei, tushi, yu jiazhi* [The Interest, Forms, and Value of Literati Painting] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 1993), chapter 6.
- 2 In the 1940s, although Xu's works and the artistic position they represented were criticized by some traditionalist painters in Beijing, this criticism was not taken seriously in intellectual circles. During the Cultural Revolution, Xu's artistic position was not attacked by the rebels, and he himself was even promoted as the antithesis of the "reactionary painter Qi Baishi." See Shanghai meishujie dapian ziliaobianji bu [Editorial Department of Materials of the Great Criticism in the Shanghai Art Circle], ed., "Lu Dingyi, Zhou Yangyi huo biandi Xu Beihong, chupeng Qi Baishi, yongxin xian'e" [The Gang of Lu Dingyi and Zhou Yangyi Belittle Xu Beihong and Flatter Qi Baishi With Evil Intentions] in *Shanghai meishujie dapian ziliao* [Materials of the Great Criticism in the Shanghai Art Circle] 8 (1967).
- 3 For materials concerning Gu Wenda's artistic experiments, see my essay "Cong Liu Guosong yu Gu Wenda de bijiao Zhong kan xiandai shuimohua fazhan de wenhua qingjing" [Viewing the Cultural Backdrop to the Development of Modern Ink Painting Through a Comparison of Liu Guosong and Gu Wenda], in *Xiandai Zhongguo shuimohua xueshu yantao hui lunwen zhuanji jilu* ("The Symposium on Modern Chinese Painting" Conference Treatise), ed. National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (Taipei: National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 1994), 179-201.
- 4 See Lang Shaojun, "Liu Guosong zai Dalu" [Liu Kuo-sung in Mainland China], *Longyu: Wenwu yishu* (Dragon Roots), November 1992, 81-87.
- 5 With the exception of footnoted quotes, all of the direct quotes concerning Taiwan's modern art movement come from Hsiao Chong-ray (Xiao Qiongrui), *Wuyue yu Dongfang—Zhongguo meishu xiandai hua yundong zai zhanhou Taiwan zhi fazhan* (1945-1970) [Fifth Moon and Ton Fan: The Development of the Chinese Fine Art Modernism Movement in Postwar Taiwan (1945-1970)] (Taichung: Tunghai University Press, 1991).
- 6 Gao Jianfu, "Wo de xiandaihua (xin Guohua) guan" [My View of Modern Painting (New Chinese Painting)] in *Meishu lunji* [An Anthology of Fine Art Theory], volume 4, ed. Shen Peng and Chen Lusheng (Beijing: Renmin meishu chuban she, 1986), 54.
- 7 Liu Guosong, "Wo de sixiang licheng" [My Intellectual Journey], *Xiandai meishu* (Journal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum) 29 (April 1990): 16.
- 8 Chu-Tsing Li (Li Zhujin), "The Confluence of Chinese and Western Art: The Artistic Growth of Painter Liu Kuo-sung," in *The Paintings of Liu Guosong*, ed. Taipei Fine Arts Museum (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1992), 29. [Yan Shanchun quotes from the Chinese version of Li's essay, which names Franz Kline instead of Jackson Pollock. The original English version of Li's essay contained several typographical errors, which have been corrected here for readability.]
- 9 Ibid., 30.
- 10 Liu, "Wo de sixiang licheng," 19.
- 11 Ibid., 19-20.
- 12 Li, "Confluence," 37. [Again, typographical errors in the original have been corrected for readability.]
- 13 Lang Shaojun, "Tansuo chuantong yu xiandai de qihé: Liu Guosong huihua de yinxiang" [Exploring the Meeting Point of Tradition and Modernity: Impressions of Liu Kuo-sung's Painting], *Xiandai meishu* (Journal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum) 29 (April 1990): 26.
- 14 Liu, op. cit. note 7.
- 15 Han Bao-de, "In Pursuit of the New, the Different, and the Changing: Liu Kuo-Song Changes the Face of Tradition" (Qiuyi, qixin, qibian—wei chuantong yirong de Liu Guosong), *Taiwan meishu* (Journal of the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts), no. 18 (October 1992): 32.
- 16 Ibid.

## LIU KUO-SUNG, INK, AND MODERNITY IN POSTWAR EAST ASIA

2021

LIU KUO-SUNG'S ARTISTIC accomplishments are widely celebrated in the Chinese-speaking world. Over the last ten years—marking the ninth decade of the artist's life—Liu has been the subject of six retrospective exhibitions organized by public museums in Taiwan and Mainland China, one of which toured to Singapore, Jakarta, and Bangkok, a record almost unheard of for any living Chinese artist. His work also is recognized beyond the art field as the embodiment of Chinese modernity: for instance, his painting *Misty Mountains Afar* (1969) was chosen as the cover image for *A New History of Modern Chinese Literature* (Fig. 1), a 2017 milestone compendium published by Harvard University Press that chronicles the literary development of the Chinese language in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In 2016, Liu was elected as an international honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the first Chinese visual artist to receive this honor.

Liu Kuo-sung's stature is further underscored by his transnational experiences, which over the decades not only have shaped the development of his art, but also have opened up new artistic dimensions for those communities with whom he interacted as an artist. Thus, for the purpose of this Reader, it is important to contextualize his work in wider cultural and geographical contexts.

How do we situate Liu's art, and to some extent, his phenomenon, in the discourse of global art history, beyond that of the Chinese cultural sphere? My attempt to answer this question begins with defining several key terms.

In Chinese art, Liu is heralded as the "Father of Modern Ink," marking his pioneering contributions to modernizing Chinese ink painting since the 1960s. His early ideas to discard the use of traditional brushes and to allow the materiality of paper to play a part in the surface texture created a plethora of new possibilities for ink painting. Engaging with the material, technique, and philosophy of traditional ink painting and calligraphy without repeating the classical forms, Liu led the charge of the Fifth Moon Painting Society (*Wuyue huahui*), a modernist art group he co-founded in Taipei in 1956, in investing in this form of experimentation. Their efforts were the major force behind a paradigmatic shift in Chinese painting, when, in the mid-1960s, modernist ink painting acquired the name *shuimohua* (ink painting), a gesture to differentiate it from the orthodox styles of ink painting, or *guohua* ("national painting"), itself an early twentieth-century term to distinguish from Western painting and its approach, material, and standards.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, the new experiments of mainland Chinese artists working within the material and conceptual fields of ink generated the broad adoption of the abbreviated term *shuimo* (ink art) as a mark of creative potential and a growing ambition to break away from preconceived notions of medium boundaries.<sup>2</sup> To the credit of Liu Kuo-sung and his cohort, ink art's connection to Chinese aesthetic philosophies and its nod to

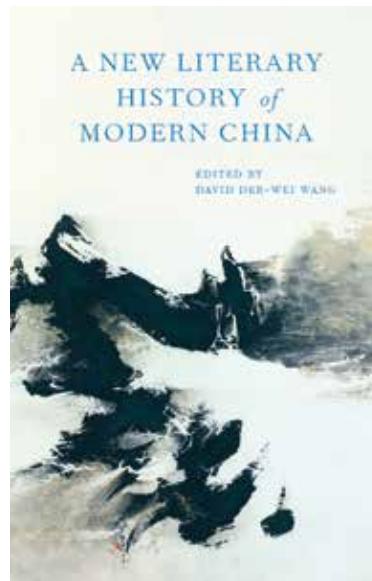


FIG. 1 Cover of *A New Literary History of Modern China*, edited by David Der-wei Wang, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press  
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international painting movements, namely, abstraction, ensured its enduring presence beyond the twentieth century.

In the discourse of global modern and contemporary art, however, ink art/*shuimo* has often faced challenges fitting in. In one sense, ink art is a culturally specific practice, where artists have reinterpreted or repurposed their artistic heritage to produce visual productions suitable for their new political, social, and personal realities since the postwar era. Furthermore, because of ink art's close association with tradition, its default classification is traditional ink painting, a discipline that has its own system of training, evaluation, and circulation and that historically has been separated from the discussions about Western art, both in the West and in China. In another sense, ink practitioners often found inspiration in or parallels with European and American modernist art. The modernization of ink therefore is partially tied to a desire to draw connections between two discrete aesthetic systems and to be properly considered in the international art world while highlighting cultural characteristics. Artists working in ink art neither completely follow the traditional path nor fully exercise tropes of avant-garde art, a position that makes it challenging for the contemporary discourse to accommodate them. Even when the discourse of global contemporary art began to emerge in museums and biennials around the world in the early 1990s, and Chinese art itself began to include other more contemporary mediums and types of artistic production, ink art was rarely discussed in this context.<sup>3</sup>

The political divisions between mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong resulted in the different timelines of development of modernist art in these locations; their respective artistic trajectories are seldom considered in tandem. The power dynamics

between these places also often either excluded Taiwan and Hong Kong from academic and museological discussions in Chinese art or appended them as an afterthought, even when these artists played integral roles in the development of Chinese art as we know it today.

This essay seeks to address this issue by situating Liu's work in two overlapping and concentric frameworks: postwar Chinese art and postwar East Asian art. It is precisely because of Liu's outsized influence across borders and disciplines that his work can serve as a powerful case study for modernist art histories. Accordingly, the first part of this paper examines how Liu Kuo-sung modernized ink painting through his artistic practice and how this impacted the course of Chinese art history. Following his artistic trajectory from his emergence and maturity in 1950s and 1960s Taiwan, to his tenure in Hong Kong from the 1970s to the early 1990s when he taught at the Fine Arts Department of New Asia College (today part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong), and to his introduction to the mainland Chinese art scene in the early 1980s, the section examines his innovative proposals to update ink painting and the deeper significance behind his efforts. The second section looks across postwar East Asia for parallels, connections, and distinctions in the developments of modernist art, with a specific focus on ink art, as a way to consider Liu's work in an expanded context. Like their Chinese counterparts, artists in Japan and Korea historically have dealt with the binary of traditional and Western art and tackled questions of modernity. A comparative art history lens will illuminate some shared pictorial and methodological concerns as well as varied strategies between Liu's art and his Japanese and Korean contemporaries. This section uses abstraction as the thread to place Liu in the discourse of postwar modernist art, evaluating his contribution to this global tendency in painting that remains influential today.

### New Tools, New Techniques

Though Liu Kuo-sung began his artistic career and had his major breakthroughs in Taiwan, and today is most celebrated as a Taiwanese artist, his influence has been felt across the Chinese-speaking world. Born in Anhui province in 1932, Liu emigrated to Taiwan with the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist) government in 1949, in the immediate aftermath of the Chinese Civil War. In 1956, he co-founded the Fifth Moon Painting Society after graduating

from the Fine Arts Department of the Taiwan Provincial University of Education (now National Taiwan Normal University) in Taipei. Trained in both Chinese and Western painting and unsatisfied with the status quo, initially he adopted Cubist, Art Informel, and Abstract Expressionist styles, information about which he had gleaned from American and European art books and magazines available in Taiwan. He soon turned to the goal of modernizing Chinese painting on its own terms and committed to ink and paper, a decision that was both driven by a profound cultural pride and by an acute awareness of the limitations posed by the narrow-minded attitudes of cultural elites and government officials who tightly controlled artistic production.

Beginning in 1963, he applied ink with an artillery-cleaning brush onto custom-made cotton paper and peeled off the coarse fibers to create feathery white marks that mimicked the traditional texture strokes (*cun*) of Chinese literati painting. Liu's new technique moved the emphasis away from brushwork, the traditional measure for a painter's skills, to the materiality of ink and paper. His invention encouraged the reinterpretation of the aesthetics of classical landscape painting and calligraphy, not by recycling or copying, but by emphasizing the mark with new vocabularies. The abandonment of the brush is not entirely new; there were pre-modern artists who used their hands or splashing ink to paint, but they were considered eccentrics and outliers by the mainstream.<sup>4</sup> The American Abstract Expressionists, whose innovations in painting techniques had been broadcast worldwide through powerful diplomatic and media channels in the postwar period, famously employed unorthodox methods to drip, pour, and slash paint onto the canvas. Liu's effort can be seen as a combination of these influences. Several of his fellow members in the Fifth Moon Group joined this effort of adopting new tools or techniques: Fong Chung-ray (Feng Zhongrui, b. 1933) invented a brush from rolled palm leaves to create wispy ink marks (Fig. 2), and Chuang Che (Zhuang Zhe, b. 1934) applied paper collage on canvas while adding deconstructed calligraphic marks by using bamboo sticks in diluted oil paint in place of the traditional brush and ink (Fig. 3). These artists sidestepped the age-old rules and systems of evaluation to choose qualities that could make the practice and the texture of paintings modern, giving themselves artistic license to adopt a more avant-garde method of production, and becoming one of the first groups of artists to do so in postwar Chinese history.<sup>5</sup>



FIG. 2 Fong Chung-Ray, 67-79, 1967  
Ink, color, and acrylic on paper,  
20.98 x 25.20 in (53.3 x 64 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong © Fong Chung-Ray



FIG. 3 Chuang Che, *Moon Eater*, 1967

Oil, ink, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 47.95 × 37.91 × 1.38 in (121.8 × 96.3 × 3.5 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong © Chuang Che

### Abstraction by Way of Landscape and Calligraphy

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, through his reading of the theoretical essays by Zhang Longyan (1909–2009), a calligrapher, cultural historian, and educator in Taiwan, Liu realized the possible connections between Western modernist abstraction and Chinese landscape paintings and calligraphy. To Liu, the concept that painting need not be illustrative, but can be about an idea, a feeling, an attitude, or a texture as evidenced in abstract art, was compatible with the inherent philosophical and poetic nature of Chinese landscape painting. The international reputation of the New York School's expressive abstract paintings appealed to Liu and his cohort, especially when they understood Franz Kline's (1910–1962) intersecting black lines on a white background, and Jackson Pollock's (1912–1956) liberal drips all over his canvas, as influenced by and akin to Chinese calligraphy. Moreover, landscape painting and calligraphy are the most revered forms of Chinese art, and with their modern potential, naturally became the anchor for Liu Kuo-sung and other Fifth Moon painters for their experiments in abstraction.

This revelatory moment in early 1960s Taiwan, where the project to modernize Chinese painting took flight, was arguably the first time since the May Fourth Movement (ca. 1917–1921) that Chinese artists successfully reconciled the two divergent directions in the cultural reform project: "traditionalism" and "westernization." Early twentieth-century Chinese painters like Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, and Liu Haisu—the so-called first generation of modernist painters—started this challenge, but it was Liu's cohort in Taiwan who fruitfully pushed the wave forward.<sup>6</sup> This enlightened vision was cautiously endorsed by the Taiwan officials as Liu

and his fellow modernist painters were frequently chosen by the government to represent the Republic of China in international showcases such as the São Paulo Biennial (from 1957 to 1971) and Paris Youth Biennial (1959), shaping the image of Chinese art abroad. Though this turn toward abstraction began partially as a survival strategy for Liu and other young artists seeking to insert their voices into a highly conservative and politicized environment, it ushered in a breakthrough in Chinese painting that seemed compatible with an international trend.

Liu's paintings of the 1960s discarded traditional forms or structures and relied on combinations of broad strokes of ink and material textures to conjure an image, after a process of culling the mechanics of painting. These "components" of painting became the central attention of his work, marking an inherently modernist shift. The visual qualities of inky strokes and large areas of blank space are also distinctive identifiers of Chinese aesthetics. Often titled with evocative phrases that conjure poetry or philosophy (*Silence in Movement*, Fig. 4) or even directly referencing landscape masterpieces (*Early Spring*, the same title as Song-dynasty painter Guo Xi's masterpiece), Liu's paintings projected a feeling of longing and awe toward a signifier of landscape that resonated with many among his audience. Liu's fellow mainland immigrants to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War had experienced the humiliation of defeat and the trauma, loss, and anguish of displacement. Liu's abstracted landscapes summarized the idea of Chinese painting in a turbulent time for a particular demographic, for whom the distant landscape of the homeland could only be perceived as fragmented and idealized, remembered as a vague feeling, or reduced to representative features. The tips of the peaks veiled by clouds brought transcendence to the viewers in Taiwan as they navigated their new realities and relationships to landscape. In other words, Liu's abstracted landscape reflected a political and psychological condition as well as fulfilled a therapeutic need and a critical necessity for renewal. But precisely because of landscape's symbolic meaning to a diasporic population, Liu's abstract rendering of it was in sync with the Kuomintang government's objective in boosting the collective confidence through culture, which also enabled its success. This was perhaps why Liu's landscape, partly nostalgic and partly recuperative, did not elicit mournful emotions. Instead, it was seen as hopeful and aspirational, as it captured the mystic and monumental quality of landscape, the expressive, spontaneous virtuosity of calligraphic marks, and to some extent glorified these characteristics to his benefit. It provided an important connection to the enduring past with an eye to the present.<sup>7</sup>

### Modernist Ink in Colonial Hong Kong

In 1971, Liu Kuo-sung arrived in Hong Kong to teach in the Fine Arts Department of New Asia College, part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the British colony's most prestigious art program. By then, artists of Hong Kong's New Ink Movement, led by Lui Shou-kwan (Lü Shoukun, 1919–1975) and Wucius Wong (Wang Wuxie, b. 1936), had garnered much success within the territory and somewhat abroad.<sup>8</sup> Like their Taiwanese counterparts, Lui and Wong also favored abstraction for their stylistic revolution of ink painting. Lui's abstract compositions (Fig. 5) of broad, calligraphic strokes or of liberal applications of ink washes foregrounded spontaneity and Zen Buddhist philosophy, while Wong's paintings (Fig. 6) were informed by surrealist tendencies and modern design principles, as well as structures of monumental landscape



FIG. 4 Liu Kuo-sung, *Silence in Movement*, 1963. Ink and color on paper, 22.24 x 47.01 in (56.5 x 119.4 cm)



FIG. 5 Lui Shou-kwan, *Winter*, 1968  
Ink on paper, 37.48 x 17.83 in (95.2 x 45.3 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong © Helen C. Ting



FIG. 6 Wucius Wong, *Infinite Landscape*, 1964  
Ink and color on paper, 18.70 x 52.09 in (47.5 x 132.3 cm). M+, Hong Kong © Wucius Wong

from the Song dynasty (960–1279). In the mid-1960s, these two Hong Kong artists published their theoretical ideas concerning the modernization of Chinese ink painting in several literature and arts magazines in Taiwan and formed a loose alliance with the like-minded Fifth Moon artists through exhibitions there, in Hong Kong, and abroad.

Prior to Liu's arrival in Hong Kong, several commercial galleries and modernist art organizations there had championed his work throughout the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> One of his early paintings, *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains* (1963) (Fig. 7), was collected by the City Hall Art Gallery (the precursor to the Hong Kong Museum



FIG. 7 Liu Kuo-sung, *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains*, 1963  
Ink and color on paper  
21.10 x 33.78 in (53.6 x 85.8 cm)  
Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection



FIG. 8 Liu Kuo-sung, *Eclipse*, 1971. Ink and acrylic on paper, 47.24 × 204.33 in (210 × 519 cm). Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong

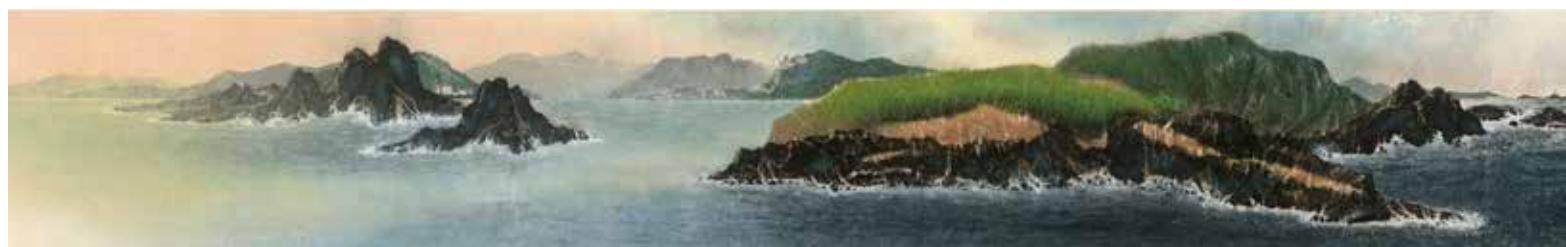
of Art) in 1964, the earliest occasion for his work to enter a museum collection. In a way, Liu's adopted home had spent a decade embracing and promoting modern ink, as its institutions facilitated its circulation, and as artists like Lui Shou-kwan and Wucius Wong created the theoretical background and visual references that encouraged the "blending of East and West"—for lack of a better term, but one that was adopted by Hong Kongers of the colonial era. Therefore, the popularity of Liu's work in Hong Kong at that time is unsurprising. As the 1970s Taiwanese art world shifted more towards the nativist exploration of an indigenous Taiwanese identity, and many of the modernist artists of Liu's generation had

moved to the United States and Europe to pursue other opportunities, Liu's choice of a more "conservative" move within Asia merged the parallel scenes of modern ink in Hong Kong and Taiwan and pushed Hong Kong to take modern ink further.

Indeed, Liu's time in Hong Kong overlapped with the rapid transformation of the city into an international trading, manufacturing, and transportation hub, an external factor that had certain effects on Liu's painting of this period. It is in Hong Kong where he expanded his Space Painting (*Taikong hua*) series, including *Which is Earth?* and *Moon's Metamorphoses*, which he began in 1969, inspired by the Apollo moon-landing mission. In a typical



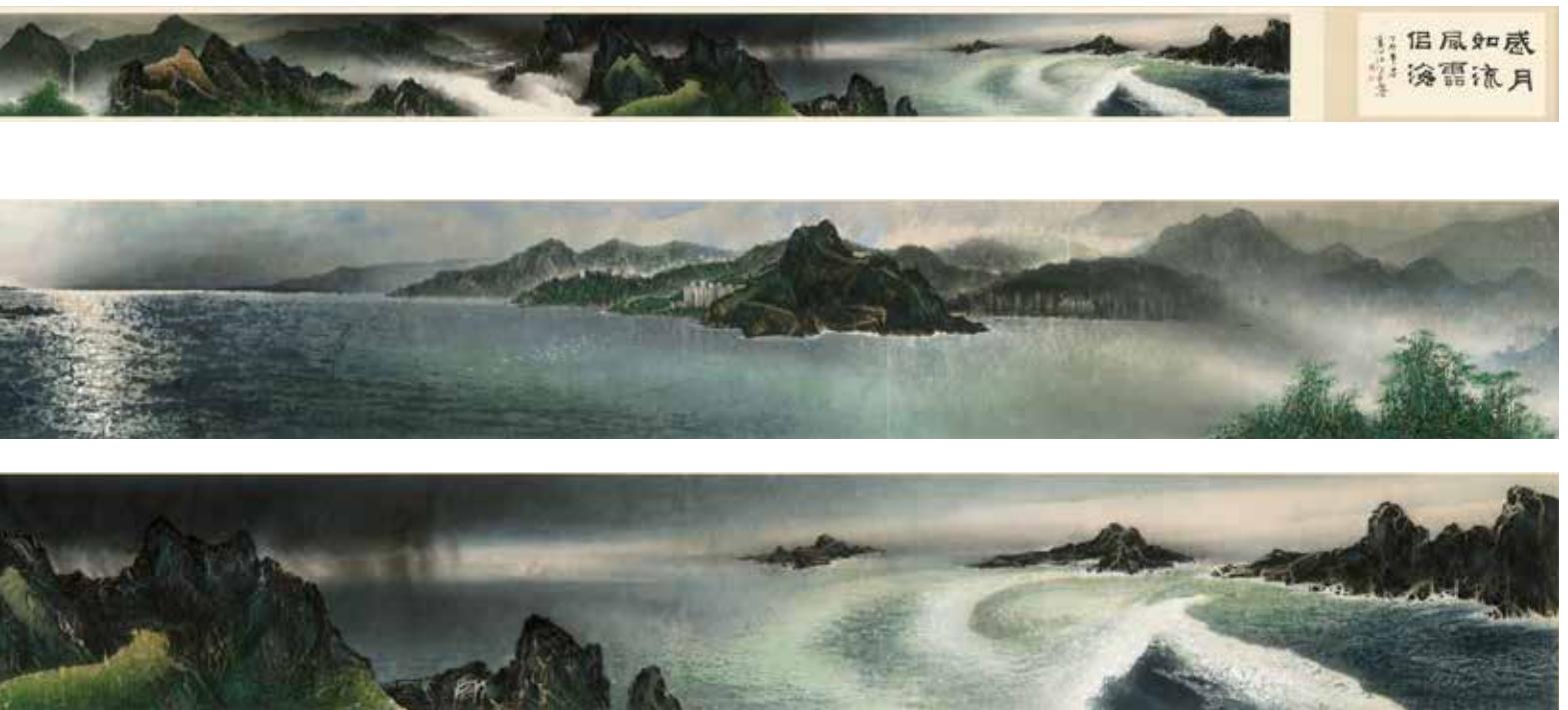
FIG. 9 Liu Kuo-sung, *Scenery of Hong Kong*, 1987. Ink and color on paper, handscroll, 18.23 × 503.15 in (46.3 × 1278 cm). Private collection, Taiwan





composition, a disc representing the moon (or sun) hovers above a horizon line over Liu's signature abstract landscape with calligraphic ink marks atop a textured paper surface. This split structure was achieved through the use of collage in precise proportions, as well as employing the techniques of hard-edge painting. Luminous colors such as bright red, emerald green, and midnight blue in acrylic paints dramatically updated Liu's palette and brought the theme of meditation on the cosmos into his painting (Fig. 8). In Hong Kong he was sought after by private and public collectors alike for this postmodern juxtaposition of an imaginary landscape with the most frequently mentioned celestial

body in popular culture. But the demands of an urbanising society also prompted him to make some of his most traditional work. *Scenery of Hong Kong* (1987) (Fig. 9), a commissioned handscroll measuring over twelve meters long, was produced based on his impressions touring the archipelago of Hong Kong on a private yacht. Though his signature techniques of torn fibers and collage were duly deployed, the realistic rendering differs from his previous practices of only engaging with an imagined landscape. All of these are examples of how Liu had allowed his ink painting practice to develop with the times and to connect more directly with his audience, keeping ink painting relevant and alive.



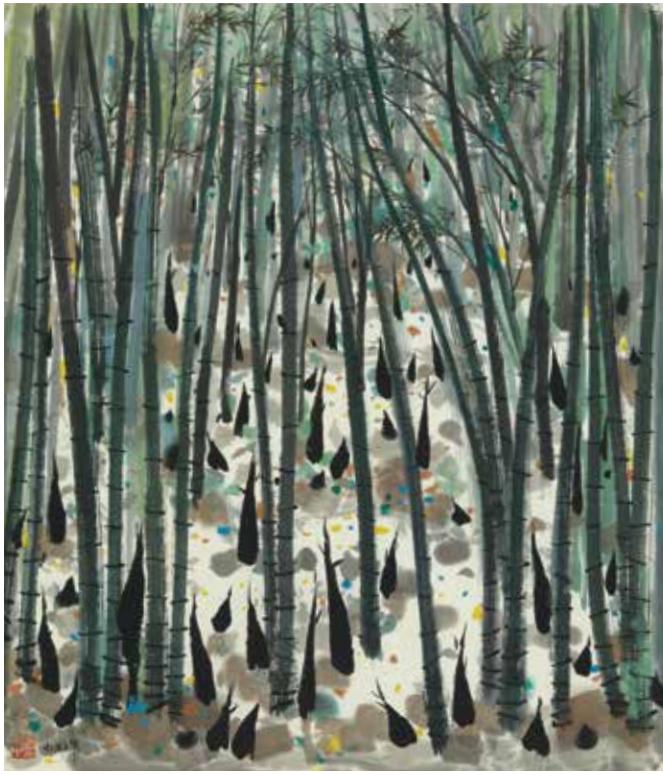


FIG. 10 Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), *Bamboo Grove*, 1979  
Ink & color on paper, 31.50 × 27.56 in (80 × 70 cm). Credit: M K Lau Collection

### Ink Modernity in Mainland China

Ink painting in mainland China between the 1950s and 1970s operated within the socialist realist system and thus took on a representational stance. Abstraction, as it became the lingua franca of the liberal, Western art world, was considered by the PRC government to be a product of bourgeois societies and thus deemed inappropriate for the Chinese population. In this period, Chinese ink painters found ways to serve the cultural ambitions of the regime while managing to insert their individual voices, in this way giving the genre its modernist update. In revolutionary ink paintings by Li Keran (1907–1989), for instance, monumental landscapes became backdrops of collective activities that delivered a political or social message. It is especially remarkable to consider the stylistic differences in the work being produced by ink painters in mainland China and in Taiwan in 1966, the year when the Cultural Revolution began and the Fifth Moon artists garnered massive support from the establishment. This is not to say one is more “modern” than the other—as many scholars have argued for different kinds of cosmopolitanism and modernity—but more to the point is the way these differences illuminate the developmental

potentials of a traditional genre and medium under heterogenous political and social circumstances.

In the early 1980s, during the early reform period, Liu Kuo-sung visited Beijing and met senior artists Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010), Li Keran, and Liu Haisu (1896–1994), among others. Liu’s reinterpretation of tradition through abstraction had an eye-opening effect on these earlier pioneers of modernizing Chinese painting—Liu’s perspective shaped by his experiences in postwar Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as his exposure to American art, seemed visually and conceptually refreshing to the mainland artists.<sup>10</sup> His abstraction achieved through technical innovations and historical associations became a convincing path for mainland artists ready to give ink painting new life. Wu Guanzhong (Fig. 10), who had been engaging in heated debates with his colleagues, found an ally in Liu’s belief in formalist abstraction. Moreover, young artists who previously worked for the propaganda machine now sought new expressions in the post-Mao era. Artists of the Grass Society in Shanghai, for instance, led by Qiu Deshu (1948–2020), chose to formally reject oil painting and its socialist-realist baggage, and immersed themselves in the expressive quality of ink abstraction. Liu Kuo-sung’s solo exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing and his subsequent exhibitions all over the country gave these younger artists a breath of fresh air (Qiu has cited Liu as an influence), in the same way that many imported exhibitions of American art in this period had jolted the mainland Chinese art world.<sup>11</sup> Later in the decade, Liu published books in China dedicated to the variety of techniques he had developed, which further allowed his influence to run wide and deep.

Liu’s return to the mainland further broadened his technique-driven innovations (rubbing, water printing, and other texture-enhancing measures). Technical experiments also seemed a sustainable strategy to constantly challenge aesthetic principles in a mature artist’s career. Though still working with the spontaneity of the material, the framework of Liu’s abstraction shifted, perhaps as he sought to reach a wider public. For him, the reunion with the land of his birth made landscape no longer symbolic and intangible, and prompted him to create impressions of famous scenic sites across the country. The recuperative and nostalgic aspects of his abstract landscape met a mainland audience seeking a new start in cultural reform. However, to artists whose formative years were circumscribed by the Cultural Revolution, Liu’s work did not seem to serve their purpose of radically challenging conventions.<sup>12</sup> Xu Bing (b. 1955), Gu Wenda (b. 1955), Yang Jiechang (b. 1956) (Fig. 11), Xu Lei (b. 1963), Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961), and others of this generation began to explore the politics of the script and figurative abstraction. But all in all, Liu’s acceptance in both mainland China and Hong Kong elevated Taiwan, a historically peripheral island, in the narrative of Chinese art history.



FIG. 11 Yang Jiechang, *I Still Remember...*, 1999–2003  
Acrylic and ink on canvas, 100.39 × 67.32 × 1.97 in (255 × 171 × 5 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong © Jiechang Yang

## Modernist Ink and Abstraction in Japan and South Korea

This section positions Liu in concurrent postwar artistic developments in East Asia to gain a more holistic view of the modernization project. Artists in Japan and Korea faced a similar set of questions regarding modernity and westernization as those in Taiwan and Hong Kong, especially when their political identities had just been revised after World War II. Their histories were closely tied to one another not only because of Imperial Japan's rule over the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, but also because of their geopolitical importance in the Cold War, when Western liberal democracies led by the United States built an alliance on the Pacific Rim against Communist expansion. Their intertwined histories also resulted from the wars within the region, namely, the Chinese Civil War that ended in 1949 and the Korean War between 1950 and 1953. Facing existential changes in the postwar decades, artists in these three places conducted an overhaul of cultural traditions, an approach that became a shared foundation, even though they may not have been fully aware of each other's activities. This background is helpful when situating Liu Kuo-sung in the region's postwar art history, as a way to find common threads and tendencies that might inform us about how this historical moment affected to modernist ink painting in general.

In the 1950s, Japanese society was dealing with the aftermath of its devastating defeat in World War II as the Allied Forces monitored Japan's rebound and recovery. The country had undergone the most thorough process of westernization—compared to its neighbors—since the Meiji Restoration, so the artistic strategies being developed were often acutely self-aware, almost always considered in relation to Western art and discourse. The Japanese avant-gardes responded to the drastic challenges to their society, psyche, and body by bringing absurdist, performative works to the streets, exploring new material qualities in traditional media, and drawing upon the figurative tradition for reflecting the unpleasant truth. Two groups of artists working in abstraction are particularly of interest to our discussion. The first is the Gutai Art Association, whose artists, under the guidance of Yoshihara Jirō (1905–1972), began their collective exploration in 1954 outside of Osaka. Group members such as Shiraga Kazuo (1924–2008), Yamazaki Tsuruko (1925–2019), and Murakami Saburō (1925–1996) explored unconventional approaches to painting and performance, often combining the two in their actions, with special attention to the relationship between the body and the material, life and art. Many of these artists were trained academically in traditional brush painting and oil painting, and in their quest for new meanings for painting, they rejected representation and embraced material potentiality and the visceral aspect of art-making. Shiraga famously made works of gestural abstraction by sliding his feet in thick oil paint, while Yamazaki applied synthetic dyes to metal surfaces and let the chemical reaction take the spotlight (Fig. 12). Many of their works did not have obvious "Japanese" characteristics, an explicit strategy to join the conversation with international art based purely on their concepts and materials. While Liu Kuo-sung's ink painting also highlighted its material and abstract qualities and discarded traditional tools, his methods made sure the Chinese cultural signifiers—the inked, atmospheric landscape and textured strokes—were front and center in his work.

This concern for the recognition of the work's Chinese quality links Liu closer to Japanese avant-garde calligraphers who loosened the structure of the script to allow the lines to lead the



FIG. 12 Yamazaki Tsuruko, *Work*, 1956  
Aniline dyes on metal, 32.24 x 28.70 in (81.9 x 72.9 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong © Tsuruko Yamazaki

composition, in an effort to distance the linguistic meaning of a character from the appreciation of the artistry. Their goal was simple: to achieve the same status for calligraphy as that of abstract painting in the discourse of international art and to argue for its relevance in contemporary culture. One prominent group to gain international attention was the Kyoto-based Bokujinkai (People of the Ink). Comprised of classically trained calligraphers, including Morita Shiryū (1912–1998, Fig. 13) and Inoue Yūichi (1916–1985), they obscured the recognizability of the characters by using denser ink and unconventional brushwork, but still



FIG. 13 Morita Shiryū, *Manaita*, 1963  
Ink on paper, 19.33 x 23.66 in (49.1 x 60.1 cm). M+, Hong Kong © Morita Shiryū  
Photo: Courtesy of Shibunkaku Co., Ltd.



FIG. 14 Zao Wou-ki, *Untitled*, 1968  
Lithograph, 24.25 x 18.07 in (61.6 x 45.9 cm)  
M+, Hong Kong. Gift of Mrs Sin-May Roy Zao, 2020. © Zao Wou-ki

maintained fundamental calligraphic integrity by retaining elements such as stroke order. In Inoue's case, he often involved his whole body—rather than just the hand, wrist, and arm—in the action of writing. Bokujinkai artists especially found kinship in the work of Franz Kline, Pierre Soulages (b. 1919), and Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, 1921–2013) (Fig. 14), who, in their view, had to various degrees integrated calligraphic marks into their acclaimed abstract paintings.<sup>13</sup> Calligraphic marks in Liu's paintings in the 1960s, in comparison, were also released from their linguistic functions.

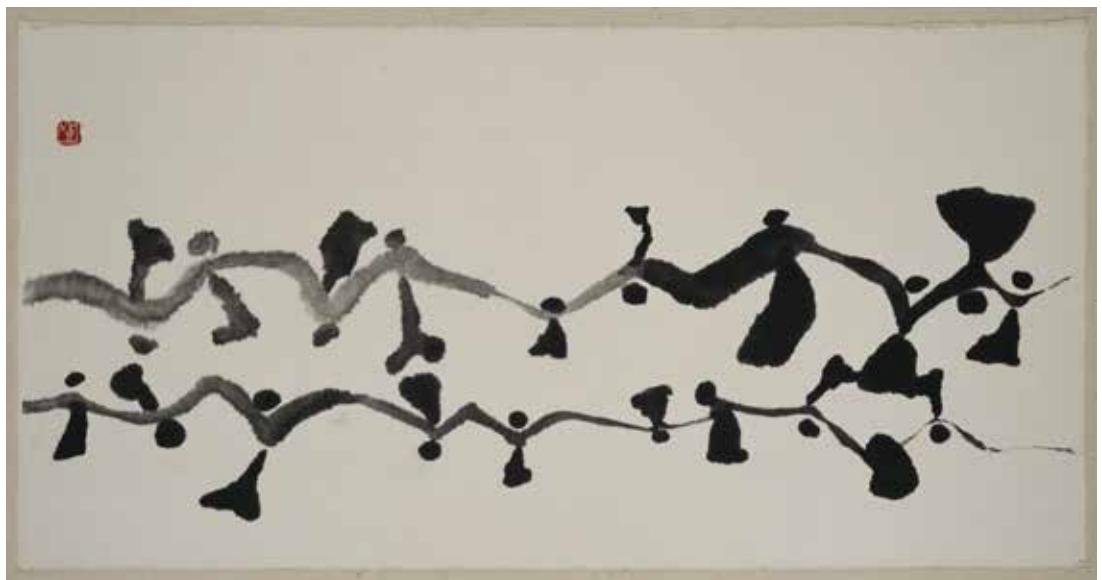
They were inspired by the lined contours of figures in the paintings of the 10th-century artist Shi Ke, who was known for an expressive variation of classical ink drawings. In Liu's ink paintings, these marks—though not done by traditional brushes—function both as signifiers for Chinese traditions and as compositional components that convey movement and visualize the energy embedded in classical ink paintings (Fig. 15). The abstracted marks in the works of Liu and the Bokujinkai artists both serve as visual references to tradition; not as a negation, but as a way of repositioning.

The 1950s brought a new chapter for South Korean artists to discover and develop their distinctive modern identities. Rejecting the legacies of Japanese-style brush paintings, and skeptical of the way oil paintings seemed to be operating with Western logic, ink painter and educator Suh Se Ok (1929–2020) led the charge of the Mungnimhoe (Ink Forest Society) in Seoul (act. 1959–1964). The group was committed to the properties of ink, water, and paper as the most authentic way of representing their cultural identity—not unlike Liu Kuo-sung's determination early in his career. During this



FIG. 15 Liu Kuo-sung, *Clear Conclusion of Clearness*, 1965  
Ink and color on paper, 24.25 x 35.87 in (61.6 x 91.1 cm). M+, Hong Kong

**FIG. 16 Suh Se Ok**  
*Dancing People*, 1977  
Ink on paper  
28.94 x 56.69 in (73.5 x 144 cm)  
Collection National Museum of Modern  
and Contemporary Art, Korea.  
© Suh Se Ok



period, Suh and many of his students in the group engaged with abstraction through diluted ink and bare-minimum expressions of strokes that together created an atmospheric exploration of the pictorial space. For the rest of Suh's career, he almost exclusively worked in monochromatic ink and explored the fine line between abstraction and figuration, using the pictogram for "people" as a motif and compositional unit to visualize the delicate entanglements of human affairs (Fig. 16).

A group of Korean painters associated with the Dansaekhwa (monochrome painting) movement emerged in the mid-1970s. This loosely defined group, who primarily worked in oil on canvas, also engaged with ink painting conventions as a departure point for their exploration of materiality. Kwon Youngwoo (1926–2013) worked almost exclusively with *hanji* (Korean paper traditionally used for ink painting), a kind of an essentialist engagement with tradition, developing relationships between the artist's body and the manipulated surfaces. From the early 1970s, Lee Ufan (b. 1936) began creating his oil paintings series *From Point, From Lines*, and later, *With Wind*, that spoke to the sensibility of the brush, the encounter between the materials, and the embodied practice, all of which pointed to the practice and philosophy of the ink tradition. He acknowledged that the point and the line were "already part of the metaphysics of ink painting."<sup>14</sup> Lee went so far as to use dark blue minerals close to the color of black ink, with a shimmery, slightly opaque hue, nodding, but not being subject to, the ink discourse. Both Lee's and Liu Kuo-sung's works re-oriented the viewer by allowing the tension and possibilities of the unpainted areas to hold one's attention—the margins are as important as the marks. Their different material choices spoke to the priorities in their respective environments, and inevitably who they imagined how their audience—domestic or foreign—might perceive these works.

## Conclusion

From the above discussions of Chinese and postwar art can be discerned the formulation of an international symphony of abstraction with contributions from different corners of East Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. The point is not to conclude that Liu Kuo-sung's engagement with the traditions of ink painting and calligraphy is echoed elsewhere; rather, this cursory investigation seeks to highlight the various responses, in theory and practice, and the nuanced relationships, to the push and pull between "traditionalism" and "westernization" faced by artists residing in East Asia during this time period, and in result, how abstraction emerged as a common interest. Liu's experiments secured a viable path for ink art, in the same way as did the experimental work of Suh Se Ok and Inoue Yūichi from within their own contexts. Together, these artists added technical, material, and conceptual complexities to the field of painting. Liu's experience navigating across the Chinese-speaking world might serve as a counterpoint to Asian artists who emigrated to Europe or the United States, and who brought their training and aesthetics to Western societies. Chinese-born artists like Zao Wou-ki and Chu Teh-chun (Zhu Dequn, 1920–2014; Liu's oil painting teacher in Taipei) who both settled in France, and Walasse Ting (Ding Xiongquan, 1929–2010) and Tseng Yuho (Zeng Youhe, 1924–2017), who moved to the United States, activated their knowledge of Chinese art history, especially of ink painting, in mostly Western mediums, and to impressive success. Émigré artists from an older generation like C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqian, 1907–2003) in New York and the Korean painter Lee Ungno (1904–1989) in Paris, on the other hand, decidedly remained "ink painters" despite becoming permanent residents in their adopted homes. These stories make evident the underlying transnational qualities of modernist ink and underscore the way that ink art is a vital and integrated area of modern and contemporary art marking, interwoven with personal and local considerations. Liu Kuo-sung's deep resonance and wide appeal across generations illuminate the possibilities of revitalizing tradition in a myriad of attitudes and styles, a contribution that endures today.

## Notes

- 1 Historically, painting (*huihua*) as a discipline and a genre in Chinese culture is produced with a brush with ink on silk or paper. In the 1920s, modern art academies began to teach Western-style painting, the distinctions between *guohua* and *xihua* (Western painting) were institutionalized. In the postwar Taiwan and Hong Kong, ink paintings adopted the name *shuimohua* to emphasize its material rather than its representative qualities of a nation-state. In Taiwan in particular the term was also used to differentiate from Japanese-style brush painting, a legacy of the colonial time, which were generally polychromatic works.
- 2 Several instances predate this shift to shed the nationalistic association and to empower the traditional medium of ink with contemporary potential. In 1962, Hong Kong's Modern Literature and Art Association mounted an exhibition of contemporary artists with one category dedicated to *shuimo* (water and ink) to differentiate from other media such as oil painting and sculpture. In 1964, an exhibition in Taiwan titled *Xiandai shuimo zhan* (Modern Ink Exhibition) included Liu Kuo-sung's work. The same year, Liu co-founded the organization Zhongguo xiandai shuimohua hui (Chinese Modern Ink Painting Society) to push toward a new kind of ink painting.
- 3 There are some exceptions to this argument. The Shanghai Biennial 2000 showcased many contemporary ink works by artists from mainland China and Taiwan, in the same venues with other "contemporary" works. For more detailed analysis, see *Uncooperative Contemporaries: Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in 2000* (London: Afterall, 2020) and Hou Hanru, Toshio Shimizu, and Zhang Qing, *Shanghai Biennale 2000*. (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2000).
- 4 Liu Kuo-sung, "Lun chouxiang huihua" [On Abstract Painting], *Bihui* 2, no. 3 (October 1960), 28.
- 5 The Ton Fan Group (also known in English as the Eastern Painting Society) was another modernist art group founded in Taipei in 1956, who also initiated avant-garde pictorial strategies around the same time. Hong Kong's ink painter Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975) also began his abstract expressions in the late 1950s.
- 6 Yan Shanchun, "Liu Guosong de yishushiyan ji qi zai ershi shiji zhongguo meishusi shang de yiyi" [Liu Kuo-sung's Liu Guosong's Experimental Art and Its Significance for Chinese Art of the Twentieth Century] in *Liu Guosong yanjiu zhan: Liu Guosong yanjiu wenxuan* [An Exhibition of the Art of Liu Kuo-sung: Selected Writings on the Art of Liu Kuo-sung], ed. Lee Chun-yi (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1996), 123.  
[Translated in this Reader, 177–187.]
- 7 For more discussion of the significance of landscape as a subject and framework of postwar ink painting in Taiwan, see Lesley Ma, "'The New Chinese Landscape' in the Cold War Era," in *Visual Representations of the Cold War and Post-colonial Struggles: Art in East and Southeast Asia*, eds. Midori Yamamura and Yu-chieh Li. (London: Routledge, 2021), 9–30.
- 8 According to the artists' exhibition histories, Lui had shown in museums and galleries in the UK; Wong in the US. Lui was included in the Republic of China presentation for the São Paulo Biennial in 1965, and Wong in 1961.
- 9 For example, Chatham Gallery in Kowloon and the First Exhibition of the Modern Literature and Art Association were among the first to display Liu's work in the early 1960s.
- 10 Liu Zijian, a well-known experimental ink painter based in Shenzhen, reasoned that Liu and his cohorts in Taiwan had not the same burden as the early twentieth-century modernist revolution in painting and were able to confront only the ultra-orthodox legacy of ink painting and the impact of Western contemporary art; and that geographical and art historical advantage had given Liu the opportunity to come up with new concepts. See Liu Zijian, "Guxiang, wo tingdao nide shengyin: cong dalu xiandai shuimohua chuangxin de jige jiemian kandao liugosong de yingxiang" [I Hear Your Voice, My Country: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of Liu Kuo-sung's Impact on Modern Chinese Ink Painting] in Lee Chun-yi, 142.  
[Translated in this Reader, 118–128.]
- 11 The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston's collection exhibition in Beijing and Shanghai in 1981 and American artist Robert Rauschenberg's exhibition *ROCI China* (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange) in Beijing in 1985 were especially influential to many of the artists.
- 12 Liu Xiaochun, "Zhangli yu biaoxian" [Tension and Expression], *Jiangsu Huakan*, quoted in Liu Zijian, 153.
- 13 In mid-1958, the Bokujinkai group welcomed the visit by Pierre Soulages and Zao Wou-ki, who were on a world tour from Paris. The encounter was documented in an issue of *Bokubi*, the association's magazine.
- 14 Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 172.

**Joan Stanley-Baker**

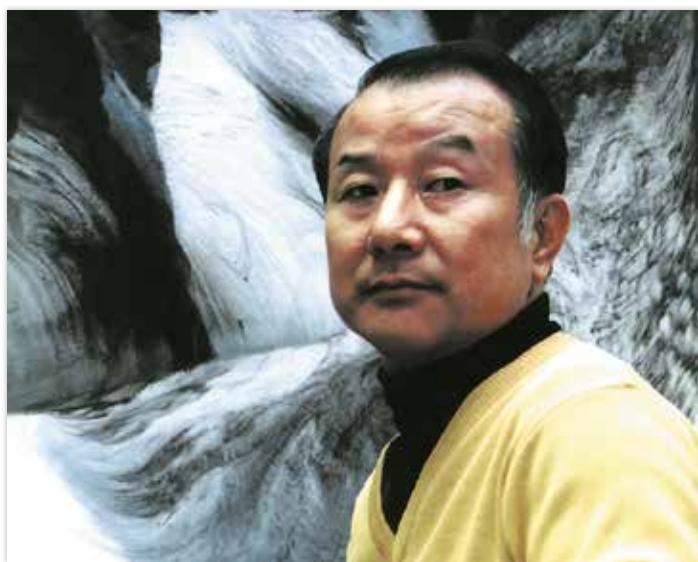
**LIU GUOSONG ON HIS ROLE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART**

2001

**AT 68, TAIWAN ARTIST LIU GUOSONG** has secured a firm position in the history of 20th century Chinese painting (Fig. 1). In 1998 at "A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China," the modern section of the Guggenheim Museum's "5,000 Years of Chinese Art" exhibition, Liu, alone from Taiwan, was prominent among the panoply of painters. Yet during the last century, perhaps the most turbulent in the history of China, with the displacement of millions of people, Liu's growth as an artist took place against a background of incredible cultural inconsistency. Born on the eve of the Japanese invasion of China's northeast and growing up without parents, Liu's emergence as a major artist was wrought through great effort, strong will, daring, cunning and ceaseless experimentation. Liu's approach to his life, as to his art, has been empirical, practical and opportunistic. His strong nose for dilemmas in China's artistic psyche, his indefatigable will to try new alternatives, and his well-timed, well-publicized style changes and public manifestos have kept him in the limelight for the past forty years. His global exhibitions and sale prices exceed those of many other Chinese artists, but unlike those Chinese masters with equal or greater fame abroad, Liu's *oeuvre*, both verbal and visual, has built a far wider popular base in Taiwan, China and Hong Kong.

Painting for Liu is a constant act of revalidation and renewal. It is not so much personal expression that commands his passion as the liberation and development of Chinese painting for global survival and esteem. Liu's contribution to Chinese art has been to open up technical possibilities for experimentation from which an infinity of styles can emerge. Indeed, his followers from Hong Kong, Taiwan or China have each developed a style in which personal expression is manifest. Fiber-textured paper, water, ink, pigments, brush—in that order, are his stock-in-trade. Overcoming the hegemony of brushwork that had emasculated Chinese painting since the 14th century, Liu Guosong, never a product of the *wenren* literati elite, freely creates new images never before seen. A hardy survivor, he was not bothered by the storms of opposition that first greeted his revolutionary acts. Free of preconditioned standards of excellence, he continued his experimentation with ever greater vigour. His belief that one should experiment and discover unknown beauty has at last, after decades of heated debate, become accepted in the Chinese painting world. As a product of a Western art-based curriculum, Liu was able to view the legacy of Chinese painting, as well as Taiwan's art pedagogy with fearless irreverence and a cool, critical eye. He saw that a great deal of artistic opportunity had been left untapped for centuries.

By unleashing this flood of artistic possibilities, Liu has opened the way for future Chinese painters. It is now possible, and thanks largely to his ceaseless proselytizing, acceptable throughout the Chinese-speaking world, to paint without a brush, or without any "subject matter." In bringing Chinese painting and contemporary Western painting to this meeting point, he has been in the vanguard of creating a global language for the use of pigment in the abstract manner. Since his retirement from the Institute of Plastic Arts, which he had helped establish in 1996 at Tainan National College of the Arts, Liu has continued to exhibit, and to teach privately. In late June last year, we met at his home in Taichung. Liu reminisced about his life as an artist, and discussed his role in art movements both in Taiwan and China.



Liu Guo-sung, c. 2000, standing in front of his 1985 painting  
*Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles*

**Joan Stanley-Baker:** How do you see yourself with regard to 20th century Chinese painting?

**Liu Guosong:** When people write about me, few discuss my thoughts on painting. For example, I realized that Chinese painting was a lost cause without a future, even while I was in my second year at National Taiwan Normal University. Why was it that in our generation artists were giving up Chinese tradition?

At first I instituted a "revolution against traditional brushwork hegemony" (*ge zhongfeng di ming*). I revolted against the notion that every artist, no matter what he painted, was assessed primarily according to the quality of his brushwork, and rarely on originality in composition, artistic message, color, texture or innovation. I felt it was simply feudal to judge everyone according to a single criterion, and a technical one at that. I urged the overthrow of brushwork hegemony.

My second revolt was against the hidebound approach to the study of painting, based on a broad stylistic foundation culminating in a pyramid-like pinnacle at the top. Students were forced to



Liu Kuo-sung, *Rhythmic Flow*, 1964

Ink and color on paper, 53.15 x 30.51 in (135 x 77.5 cm). Collection of Taipei Fine Art Museum

practice methods of each genre and category of painting, wasting years in apprenticeship imitating the ancients. We were expected to master traditions first and only then develop our individual image. In other words, one sought first to excel technically and only afterward to begin creating something new.

At The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where art education was fairly backward with only very few students applying each year, we had to select one out of two applicants, compared to Taiwan, where we select one out of hundreds. These Hong Kong kids had seen nothing of oil painting, let alone innovations in Chinese or Western painting.

In my experiment there, I showed eighty slides of current American photo-realism on my first day. The students were stunned. They had never seen anything like it. I asked if they wished to learn this manner of painting and they cried, "Yes!" So I asked them to buy oils, brush, canvas and so on. For the next week, each student was to shoot one role of slides on any subject that took their fancy and bring the developed slides to class.

At the next meeting they showed the slides, one at a time. At the end I asked each student to select one that would be made into an 8 x 10 photograph. Now using a number 10 canvas, they were to project the slide onto it, and sketch the outline of the image onto their canvas.

Next I asked them to put up the photographs saying, "Since you have each done the outline, I shall now teach you to mix colors." I had instructed them not to buy square tipped brushes but only those with rounded tips, as this way they could put in the colors spreading outward, without brush-traces.

By the end of the first semester, each student had done about seven or eight paintings in this manner. During the second semester, the Hong Kong Museum of Art announced that it was receiving entries for the "Hong Kong Contemporary Art Biennial." I encouraged them all to enter. They were hesitant, only having studied painting for a year, when all the other entrants were returnees from Britain and Canada with Master's degrees in fine art. How could they compete? I said it would not be a crime if they did not win, and selected the best works of five students and entered them. The exhibition was to open in October; the jury would convene in September. By that time I was already in America but suddenly received a letter from one of them wild with joy: "Dear Teacher, all five of us were accepted, and I won first prize!" He got the Grand Prize of the entire Western section of the Biennial.

Thus I proved my point. The Impressionists did not practice photo-realism. So learning their techniques was no help for producing photo-realist works—just as painting all manner of Song, Yuan, or Ming styles does not create new Chinese painting. Traditional pedagogy insists that only after life drawing can we do oil painting. All majors in Chinese painting had to do life drawing. People like Beihong championed this. But as you can see, doing photo-realism does *not* require a foundation in life drawing. It's entirely done by copying a projected slide. In other words, for any style, the essence resides in itself and not on mastering any other form or technique.

In this experiment I proved my dictum: "First seek innovation, then seek excellence." I don't want my students to slave in Impressionism as Taiwan students do.

**JSB:** You are advocating in painting a liberation from all tradition or source-knowledge. It makes everyone equal and, in a way, anonymous.

**LGS:** Well, America was going the rootless way. When I was teaching at the University of Iowa, I saw that no one there began with life drawing. Even less with drawing plaster busts! From the beginning they taught a kind of abstract sketching. A modern language, so to speak.

**JSB:** And with regard to Chinese painting, then?

**LGS:** The same. From the start at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, I called it *shuimohua* (ink painting) instead of *guohua* (Chinese painting). What I was teaching in fact was ink painting technique, plunging immediately into new methods, without copying all the history of ancient painting.

**JSB:** This is an exciting as well as a frightening path for the neophyte, I'd imagine.

**LGS:** I believe painters are no different from scientists. They must constantly experiment. And they are judged on the significance of their discovery or creation. Every day we try and find something new. We adjust and allow our own method to evolve. Now in my life I have made all sorts of experiments. Many of my works don't use the brush at all, and as you can see there are not only ink "lines" but white lines as well. And see how natural they are? How beautiful they can be?

**JSB:** Indeed they conform to the highest standard demanded of traditional brushwork—where each stroke or dot aspires to appear natural as if "heaven-made." You do it by pulling the fibers off your famous "Guosong paper."

**LGS:** Not only pulling them off to create white lines, but inking the reverse side of the paper first and then pulling them off, to create black lines. Look, all these different methods, each differing from the other. I have compiled examples of all my inventions for eventual publication in China. I call them *tuomo hua* ("printed-ink paintings"), *pomo hua* ("splashed-ink paintings"), and then I invented one called *zhimo hua*, meaning accumulated layers of inkwash.

*Tuomo* (printed ink) means applying ink onto paper, and then wrinkling the paper and imprinting it upon the painting surface. Here the lines are formed by the wrinkles in the paper "block."

I also use water surfaces with pigments floating on top and place the painting surface on the floating pigments, stirred to my desired configuration upon the water surface. These are called *shuituo* (water-imprinted). Using the *zhimo* technique, cloud effects are made with two pieces of paper pressed together while wet. The bubbles trapped in between are manipulated to form the desired shapes, and the work can be colored while wet or after it has dried. There are myriad ways you can create images without using a single brushstroke, but the result is natural, and often reveals "brushstrokes" made entirely "by heaven."

With all these techniques, if you practice one diligently for a year, like my Hong Kong first-year students, you will develop excellence in your chosen mode. And this will give you a professional standard much faster than traditional pedagogy. So you see I first seek to differ from the rest, and only later to excel. My student's first prize after one year's hard work in something different proves this point.

**JSB:** But wouldn't your students' work all look the same?

**LGS:** Not at all! For example, those photo-realist students, the minute they submitted, you could see that their entries were different from all the rest, and also that each student had developed a style, a manner of his own. I believe my two greatest roles in Chinese art have been those of artist and teacher.

**JSB:** And the third role has been that of vociferous critic!

**LGS:** No. On this point, I certainly do not think there's been much contribution from me as a critic.

**JSB:** But what of your manifestos? Many people writing on your theories in fact do not concentrate on visual imagery, relying rather on critical jargon and speculation. This has led to the spread

of misconceptions among Chinese art readers and writers. When discussing art or artists, should we not stick to visuals?

**LGS:** I cannot agree with you more. Unfortunately many today insist on writing in this unseeing way. Now my artwork itself expresses my theories or ideas on art. For example, in *Absurd Pyramid*, the foundation is enormous. The higher you wish to reach, the broader the base must be. What a waste! Whereas *Skyscraper* bases itself on a deep foundation (that is, constant practice) all within its own ground area. The stronger the foundation, the higher the skyscraper, like students spending an entire year doing photo-realism and winning at the Hong Kong Biennial. I believe you need not master all kinds of techniques as a contemporary artist. You must specialize.



Liu Kuo-sung, *Loftiness No. 4*, 1966

Ink and color with collage on paper, 49.02 x 28.74 in (124.5 x 73 cm). Private Collection

**JSB:** Your influence has certainly been considerable, and your frequent and disparate exhibitions have helped spread your image far and wide.

**LGS:** All my life my aim has been to revitalize and modernize Chinese painting. So the best spot to do this was of course on the mainland itself. While they asked me to exhibit, I was hesitant at first, but the president of the The Chinese University [of Hong Kong] urged me to do it, and I eventually agreed. From February 1983, I had three shows that went to no fewer than eighteen cities. The Chinese had asked me along with Zhao Shao'ang and Yang Shanshen.

At each city I would deliver three lectures, using 200 slides in each. The first was on 20th century art movements in the West, the second on the development of painting in Taiwan, and the third on my own innovations in inkwash painting. Regarding my own painting techniques, I would explain each one as I showed the slides—to intense interest and heated questioning from the audience. I could never leave after each talk because there were so many questions.

Originally, they had asked me to show only at two venues, the China Art Gallery [now the National Art Museum of China] in Beijing and the Jiangsu Provincial Museum of Art in Nanjing. But after the first show opened in Beijing, there came a flood of requests from Hubei, Guangzhou, and even Harbin. But since I was already committed to teaching in Iowa that year, I had to postpone the China exhibitions until the following year. They were shown from Heilongjiang to Guangzhou, from Hangzhou to Urumqi. At that time all my travel and living expenses were paid for. To this day I am deluged with letters asking how to do this or that. I must say that my influence on the mainland has indeed been spectacular.

**JSB:** You have brought the 60s and Abstract Expressionism to Chinese art.

**LGS:** Indeed. It started in the 60s. For myself, I rebelled against the ancient dictum of *xiongyou chengzhu* ("grow bamboo in the mind"). I began to play chess with my materials; I'd make an experiment, make a move, see the results, and then make my countermove, step by step.

**JSB:** Have any ancient masters inspired you to the core?

**LGS:** Oh yes. My first sight of Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* was unforgettable. I was stunned by the monumentality, the atmospheric presence. I have tried to emulate this with series such as *Loftiness*. And I remember being totally inspired by the Shi Ke painting *The Second Patriarch in Contemplation*. This led me to the large, rough ink swashes. At the time I was looking at the paintings of Franz Kline but felt them to be somehow empty and too superficial, all on the surface. Then the Shi Ke work with its *kuangcao* (wild cursive) sort of brushwork led me to the path of the huge brushstrokes. I don't understand why all the prissy brushwork dicta survived, but never the free, cursive ink-dances of Shi Ke. Before I'd seen the Shi Ke painting, I experimented only in water-printing impressions, allowing bits of white to show through. Now I was inspired by his *feibai* ("flying white") effect of leaving whites made by simple brushstrokes, and developed my own "wild cursive" brushwork.

**JSB:** I see you use all manner of inks and blues and greens—but rarely red. Why don't you like red?

**LGS:** It is no aversion, but red pigments are difficult. Now with ink there are different possibilities; some float fine, some become large particles, dissolving in different ways. But red is rather unwieldy.

**JSB:** You have also created many techniques which you later stopped using.

**LGS:** Yes, like one with consecutive comb-like sharp peaks, which looks too mechanical and not natural. There is not enough scope for development.

**JSB:** So you seek to make things live, to re-create the power you felt in the Fan Kuan painting?

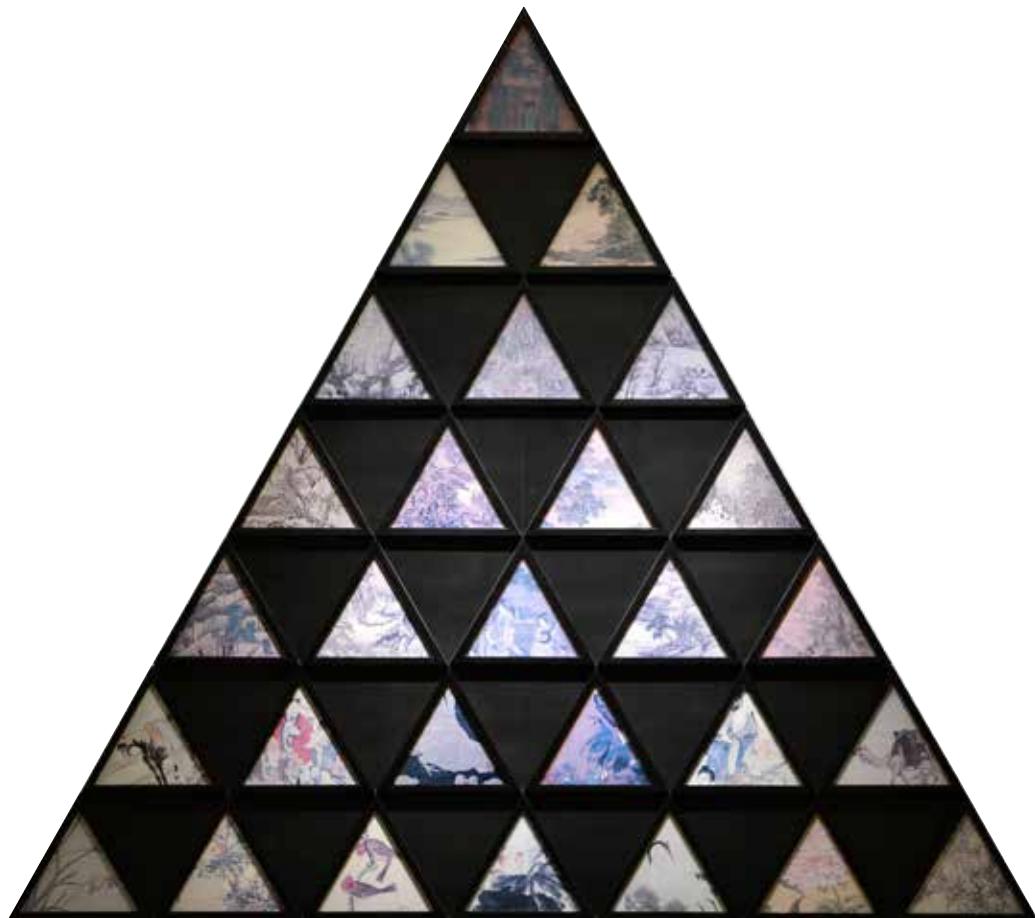
**LGS:** Yes, this is why I am going to Tibet again next week. When I last went into the snowy mountains I was so happy. My great goal after Mont Blanc and the Jungfrau is to be able to re-create that emotion of majesty.

**JSB:** When you paint from such stark image-resonance, white on white, do you step back and ponder how to develop appropriate techniques to do it? Or do you just plunge into the work and forget everything?

**LGS:** Yes. In fact I am fully absorbed in my work. People say there is no possibility for "expression" or feeling in my technical tricks. Far from it! I am totally engrossed when working, not like the typical masters who "performed" paintings while chatting and laughing with onlookers. When I work I don't hear anything. When the exercise fails, I can become gloomy and speechless for days. And when the result is good, there is that elation we cannot know from any other exercise. No, for here we live in the *process*, and not of performance as in the past, but of *creation*.

**JSB:** You have in fact developed a host of techniques with which to do brush paintings with ink and colors on paper of various sorts. You have revitalized the most traditional of Chinese expressive media. And you are offering this purely Chinese set of media as the way for the future of Chinese painting. Are you now therefore turning your back on the flat brush, on pencils, on acrylics and oils, on canvas and boards?

**LGS:** We can go overseas and learn oil painting in all styles. In the 1950s I spent seven years trying this and discovered that it is not the right way for us, born into our tradition, to follow. Of course, we can always try to master an Impressionist, flat color-field manner of painting, or whatever. But I believe that can never "become our flesh and blood" simply because they do not come from one's own life experience, our emotional and spiritual climate. It is like moving a tree to a different climate; it will not bear good fruit. We who are born and raised in our culture will never be able to express our spiritual views through the medium and expressive means born of different cultures. That is, we will never command the expression behind the medium as well as people born into that culture—the culture that produced oil painting in the first place. Likewise, when one day China becomes strong and Chinese culture



Liu Kuo-sung, *Absurd Pyramid*, 1996. Mixed media, 77.56 × 88.98 in (197 × 226 cm). Collection of Shandong Museum

a world force, people out there will come to notice China and Chinese culture, and when they discover the expressive potential of Chinese inkwash painting, they will come and study it here. I have faith that in the 21st century, Chinese ink painting or inkwash painting will become a world medium. Therefore, in order to develop Chinese inkwash painting to this degree, we cannot remain too conservative in our parameters. When I was teaching art at the University of Iowa I taught American students to do nature sketching with the Chinese (pointed tip) fur brush. And when the time came for me to return to Hong Kong they sought to keep me there, wanting more of this Oriental approach. They even asked: "How much do you want?" I replied that it was not a matter of remuneration, but I felt that frankly, Western painters did not have so much to offer toward the development of Chinese inkwash painting. If I taught Chinese students, they would be able to help develop Chinese culture, and Chinese painting with it, to greater heights. And so in the end I returned to teach in Hong Kong.

Now traditional masters of ink painting are said to have stressed *bimo*, brush and ink. But in fact they emphasized mostly brushwork and contributed little to the development of inkwork. They left a great, great deal for us to work on and develop today. All that can be done to create lines with the brush, while keeping to traditional values of excellence, has already been discovered and developed by the ancients. But in the area of ink or inkwash they have done little. And it is here that we can and we must advance the field. Moreover it is precisely here that Western painting is in the doldrums, awaiting rescue and new inspiration. If we can make substantial contributions in the area of inkwork, I dare say

we will be on our way to entering the global area with our heads held high.

**JSB:** The way you play with ink, your many techniques and inventions over the years, can easily be learned by Western students as well, to the same effect. But in the masterly deployment of the traditional Chinese brush, only a Chinese-educated painter can excel.

**LGS:** Yes. But the landscapes dependent on traditional brushwork are the equivalent of literary Chinese or *wenyanwen*, intelligible only to the trained or elite few. What we do today is colloquial or *baihuawen*, intelligible to all. Westerners cannot understand or appreciate literary Chinese while the everyday Chinese is far more readily accepted and absorbed. Therefore in future, if we wish to push Chinese painting onto the world stage, we must offer a language that is easily accessible. For centuries Christian-based culture had pushed Chinese culture onto the fringes to be regarded as a minority or peripheral phenomenon. But when it emerges as a major force in world art, many young people will come to learn about it.

Now some people might indeed go for the more elitist literary Chinese or brush-based ink painting. But most people I think will go for the more readily accessible language of inkwash-based painting.

**JSB:** But the students you were teaching at the University of Iowa—would they not be advancing the cause of Chinese inkwash painting?

**LGS:** That's different. From beginning to end they were producing Chinese paintings from a Western perspective. They had little connection with Chinese culture. They were using the Chinese brush and paper only as a medium. But for us Chinese, of course, it is in fact far more than a medium but a spiritual thing. It is not merely material as it is for Western students, to facilitate a certain mode of image-making. For this reason, to advance the cause of this Chinese form of spiritual expression, I came back to a Chinese environment, hoping to bring up new generations of Chinese artists who are aware of their destiny.

**JSB:** Did you discuss this sense of mission with your colleagues and students during your teaching career at Tainan National College of the Arts and elsewhere?

**LGS:** I did, but alas, it fell on deaf ears. They were busy becoming international and asked "Why should our artwork look Chinese in the modern global village?" They consider traditional Chinese painting as something antediluvian.

Some years ago, many people wrote articles criticizing me, saying that ink painting was the medium of a feudal, agricultural society. That it utterly lacked a sense of contemporaneity. I wrote back saying Van Eyck "invented" oil painting and was his not an agricultural society? Now why is it modern today to paint in oils and not modern to use inkwash? What is contemporary is not the medium, I stated, but the way we do our art.

I had seen a one-man installation art exhibition in a Boston museum as far back as 1966. So what's so new about installation art today? Why insist it is up to date and inkwash painting is backward?

**JSB:** It seems that although modernism is passé in the West today, in Taiwan it is played up to iconic status.

**LGS:** Not only that, but it is institutionalized here into an ingredient at the Taipei Fine Art Museum. However, it can no longer stand alone as it did during its genesis. Now such art forms require lengthy exegeses. "Principles of Creation" for each work are attached, without relieving one whit their inaccessibility. I told my students that the Boston show of the 1960s had a work called [*The Wait*], where an old woman sat in a chair, her legs made of real human bones; her head was a tin surrounded with glass in which there were photos of her beautiful youth. On the wall behind was a portrait of her deceased husband, handsome in his military uniform, while the low table nearby was filled with photos of grandchildren. She sat stone still as a tiny living bird in a large cage next to her leapt up and down, full of life. What a terrible and moving indictment of the American society of the time! She was clearly waiting for death to relieve her from her utterly empty life that, aside from memories, had no meaning whatsoever.

But what do our Taiwan installations say now, nearly half a century later. Can you make head or tail of their works—with or without the self-aggrandizing verbiage? They are chasing after a Western image—much the way we used to call our group *Salon de mai* in the 1960s at the inception of the Fifth Moon Group. It was only after some reflection that I realized our error: why go for a French image when we are displaying our own creativity? I therefore changed the name according to the Chinese lunar calendar, where the month of May is the fifth (lunar) month: hence the Fifth Moon Group.

But now at Tainan, Taiwan's most avant-garde school of art, the teachers of fine art, having each returned from learning overseas, have sought with all their might to promote their foreign learning.

Liu Kuo-sung, *Coming*, 1973. Ink and acrylic on paper, 59.84 x 238.90 in (152 x 606.8 cm). Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong



**JSB:** There is nothing wrong with promoting "Western learning," but there is something awfully short-sighted about denying the value of traditional Chinese artistic expression and medium, and to throw it out wholesale, placing it entirely with second-hand ideas.

**LGS:** Before the Handover in 1997, the Hong Kong Biennial of Contemporary Art invited a judge from the Venice Biennale to help select the entrants. The other four members of the jury were Chinese. Well, during the adjudication, they selected many works from the "Oriental" group without question. But when they came to the "Western Art" section, the man from Venice stood silent without a word, until they asked him why. He said: "I suggest that we post a notice in this room stating that this year not a single work qualifies." The four others were startled and asked why. "Because there is no originality or creativity in any of these works. All are imitations of works done years ago." In the end, the local jury insisted they select something from the contemporary, Western section, and picked six works. And thereafter Hong Kong never invited foreigners to their jury! This story was printed in Taiwan's *Nanfang zazhi* (*Southern Journal*). So tell me, then, with this sort of provincialism how can we hope to enter the world stage and play an honest part in the international community?

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**LIU HAS DEVOTED MANY YEARS** to the reinvigoration of inkwash painting in Taiwan. But the island has become increasingly hostile to mainland traditions, while with equal zest imitating Western expression, hoping thereby to jump on the contemporary art bandwagon. Liu believes that rather than ape the West, Taiwan should create its own completely contemporary yet Chinese artistic voice. This insight, while lost in Taiwan, is sprouting roots on

the mainland. Aside from his one-man exhibitions in China, Liu was invited in 1986 to a special two-week training programme, *Xiandai Shuimo Hua Yanxiban* (Contemporary Inkwash Painting Practicum) organized by the Shandong Provincial Art Museum in Jinan. Over 200 fine arts graduates attended. Of these a very large number have continued painting throughout the past fifteen years, and eventually came to ask the government to institute a Contemporary Inkwash Painting Academy. Calligraphy had already established itself as a formal discipline; now painting followed suit.

On 19 January 2001, the Shandong Academy of Contemporary Inkwash Painting was inaugurated in Jinan, Shandong province. Liu Guosong was appointed Honorary Director. This singular accolade rewards Liu's efforts to liberate Chinese inkwash painting and give this tradition a fresh lease on life with new forms of expression while keeping its cultural identity.

In 1997 Liu led a group of Taiwan inkwash artists to Jinan for a large cross-Straits show in conjunction with twenty Shandong artists. Arriving at the scene, he was profoundly moved to see that the latter artists had outstripped the Taiwan group in the realization of their art. This was because most of the Shandong artists had started under Liu's influence or tutelage and had gone on developing with enormous zeal. In this way Liu finally saw that his long and solitary campaign against enormous odds was not in vain, and that his contributions to the "reform of Chinese inkwash painting" was indeed taking root, in a remarkably vigorous way, in the land of his birth.

This interview was previously published in *Orientations* 32, no.4 (2001): 66-71.

\*All images used in this article are courtesy of the Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.

1 [The installation described here is *The Wait* (1964-65) by the American artist Edward Kienholz (1927-1994). It was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston in 1966.]



**Johnson Chang Tsong-Zung**

**CALLIGRAPHY-PAINTING IN A NEW ERA**

2007

**IN THE PAST HALF-CENTURY** the classical art of *shuhua* (calligraphy-painting) has undergone drastic changes in the process of adjusting to modern times. The result is an art formed by the spirit of post-industrial internationalism. In the 1950s, it was called "Modem Chinese Painting," and later was renamed variously as "Modem Ink Painting" and "New Ink Painting," among others. Here "modern" refers to the cultural trends of the West in the 20th century, which puts "Modem Chinese Painting" in a position defined by its relation to the West and to the currents of internationalism when the movement first appeared. As a key prevailing visual representation of China's modern cultural identity, the transformation of calligraphy-painting brings in issues of lineage and development. Lineage demands the inheritance of tradition's essential features to assure continuity, while development involves opening up to the world at large to establish international currency. This is possible only if the art proves itself a worthy vessel by reinventing itself, and is able to redefine the heritage. Liu Guosong is a leading pioneer of modern calligraphy-painting: he has been instrumental in defining the way we understand the modern potentials of calligraphy-painting, and he continues to be a driving force in the field today.

Liu Guosong's early work was influenced by modern Western painting, and he first made his reputation with abstract and mixed-media paintings. He was key among an important group of Taiwan-based artists who founded the Fifth Moon Group [Wuyue Huahui] in 1956, which championed Western-style modern art. He was also trained in traditional painting, and the influence of this training was early on manifested in his mountain-like compositions and textural effects. He did not make the modernization of "Chinese painting" his calling until seeing the collection of the Palace Museum in Taiwan in 1961; he was so moved by this first encounter with great masters of the past that he resolved to bring alive their monumental power in his own art. Forty-five years later, the encounter that set Liu Guosong on his creative path has come full circle, with the staging of the artist's own retrospective exhibition at the original site of the Palace Museum in Beijing, in celebration of his sixty years of creative work. For the Palace Museum, symbol of China's classical cultural heritage, to present this exhibition signifies the acceptance of modern ink painting as an extension of the lineage. The lineage can only be carried forward by sorting through the complex web of new creative styles, and by being open to interpretations of its spirit and its artistic forms. From the work of Liu Guosong it is possible to see the strategies and inventive responses to half a century of challenges and radical changes in the world. He has adapted to modern life and Western influence while pushing forward the cause of calligraphy-painting. His success not only proves the resilience of the tradition, it also establishes the importance of cultural roots in creative work.

The movement of Modem Chinese Painting in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1950s carried forward the debates about cultural modernization that started in the second decade of the twentieth century. In the art world, discussions of "Chinese" versus "Western" painting remain vital in different forms even today. From the position of *shuhua*, "calligraphy-painting," and the protagonists of its moderm development, the boundary between "Westernization" and "modernization" is porous. The term "Modern Chinese Painting" contains two references to the West: the appearance of the term "Chinese Painting" in the early 20th century signifies a self-imposed boundary around the hitherto universal worldview of the art of calligraphy-painting, to align itself with the similarly styled distinctions used by other nation states, while the term "Modern" can only be defined in relation to Western history. By 1960 the term *shuimohua*, "Ink Painting," started to be widely accepted, replacing the term "Chinese Painting." This new development reflects a post-war trend that shifted away from discourse about the nation-state to that of internationalism. The term *shuimo* was first proposed by the Japanese and it emphasizes the medium of art rather than its artistic content; it categorizes the art to put it at a level field with Western media such as oil painting. The passage from *shuhua*/calligraphy-painting to *xiandai shuimohua*/Modem Ink Painting represents a gradual shift of cultural self-identity made under an implicit acceptance of an international platform of endorsement dominated by the West. With this in mind, if Modern Ink Painting was truly to achieve its goal of modernization, its ultimate aim should have been participation in setting the standards of "the moderm"; it would need to make its impact felt in the West, and try to gain acceptance to the platform of endorsement. This was not an explicit claim made by ink artists of the time, and its impact on the international scene was also limited. However, re-viewing history from this perspective, the curatorial activities and pioneering academic work of Chu-tsing Li (Li Zhujin) in the 1960s were impressively farsighted.

Western moderm art in the decades following World War II was cultivated in the context of the international politics of the time. To be international means crossing the boundaries of national cultures, which in turn means that the artistic content and artistic language need to be able to travel across national borders. In the West this trend encouraged the development of abstract art and formalism, while in socialist countries it entrenched Socialist Realism as the standard bearer of international social reform. Liu Guosong developed his style under the influence of the American abstract movement, whose concept of the liberation of brushwork has a direct Eastern source. Therefore the expressive brushwork made famous by American Abstract Expressionists was readily adopted by modern Chinese artists as their license into the "modern" discourse. This was Liu Guosong's initial approach, as it was for Lü Shoukun (Lui Shou-Kwan) and the New Ink Painting

movement in Hong Kong, and Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-ki) and Zeng Youhe (Tseng Yu-ho) in Europe. Liu Guosong focused on the metaphor of landscape, using a broad, reduced brushwork to refer to mountain ranges and incorporating the traditional multiple landscape perspectives, so that his abstraction took a form that became readily understood by both the Chinese and the international public. From the angle of international cultural trends, this development was critical for the transformation of the Chinese heritage into a "modern" art. With the spread of post-war internationalism, both through Western abstraction and formalism and Socialist Realism, the ideology of the "modern" became an arena that was open to all nations. Liu Guosong wrote in 1962: "For individual liberation and building of the self, just knowing Western art is not sufficient. It is necessary to be reacquainted with China's traditional art. As we live under the influence of both Chinese and Western traditions, I am a hybrid of Chinese and Western cultures. Therefore, to find ourselves we must analyze ourselves with an international modern eye. To express ourselves, we must buttress ourselves with the spiritual strength of both Eastern and Western traditions." He pointed directly to the heart of the matter, and understood that to engage the international platform of power, the interpretation of traditional art through current tides of modernism was essential.

Due to the specific historical context of Western art, Chinese calligraphy-painting was not equipped to enter into the theoretical discourse of the West. What it could do was to revisit calligraphy-painting with ideas of abstraction, triggering reform of its own artistic language. But language reform cannot be confined to details and by necessity must involve the entire field of the art. Liu Guosong was one of the most radical early proponents of Chinese painting reform, proposing to rebuild the system of Chinese aesthetics from the roots. He did not intend to abandon Chinese art; instead he wanted to instigate an internal reform in order to bring traditional art into the modern world. His new interpretation changed standards of taste and criteria of judgement, just as formalism in the West rewrote the rules of the game by reshaping the artistic language. What concerned Liu Guosong most was Chinese painting's entrenched mannerism and resistance to change.

As the work of a Modern Ink Painter, Liu Guosong's writings and experimentation have had far-reaching repercussions. For instance, in the 1970s he provoked wide debates by urging Chinese art to abandon the obsession with "brush-and-ink" (*bimo*). *Bimo* is at the heart of the aesthetic pursuit of traditionalists, especially since the last dynasty when this became the highest criterion of fine painting. Liu Guosong was in fact not against the canons of *bimo*, he was concerned about its confined boundaries. Although his own attempt in reinterpreting *bimo* using Western terms of point, line, and plane was not entirely convincing, it did re-direct aesthetic taste into new directions. His own pursuit of abstraction was inspired by the independence of brushwork, which paralleled the idea of the aesthetics of *bimo*; where he diverged was in the aesthetic judgement of what constituted "good" brushwork. Another example is Liu Guosong's specially designed paper, which has veins that can be stripped to resemble the "texture-strokes" of traditional landscape painting. This invention is not revolutionary, but based on embracing traditional painting's use of "texture-strokes" in the first place.

As a whole, Liu Guosong's art has never departed from the classical theme of the landscape. In the late 1960s Liu Guosong was inspired by the landing of the first astronaut on the moon to

paint his signature "Space" series that he has continued to develop throughout his career. This series should be viewed as a modern interpretation of landscape painting. The magic of traditional landscapes depends on the holistic vastness of nature; it points to a realm seemingly beyond reach while being accessible to humans. The knowledge of accessibility inspires the imagination to reach out beyond the mortal sphere. Before 1969 outer space did not constitute such a destiny for the imagination as it lay completely beyond physical human access. This changed with the moon landing. Overnight outer space came within reach. To make the link between heaven and earth more pronounced Liu Guosong generally exposes a corner of the globe as the foreground of his cosmic paintings. With this series he has extended the realm of landscape art.

While Liu Guosong has looked upon the world of landscape art as a reference for his own creativity, there are basic differences between his approach and that of traditionalists. The main difference is in the aesthetic taste. New Ink Painting is an art of the post-industrial age, when artistic taste had already been conditioned by the culture of hard edges and flat color planes. Liu Guosong tries to bring this into his art; he does not shun graphic design techniques if they can bring his paintings closer to the visual experience of contemporary audiences. In the late 1960s and 1970s when Liu concentrated on his cosmic theme he did relatively few "earthly" landscape paintings. In the mid 1980s when he again returned to natural landscapes he would leave them mostly uninhabited. Between the two views on nature, cosmic bodies and the natural landscape of these two periods, one common ground is the wholeness and purity of nature. From the perspective of the astronaut the cosmos is vast and uncontaminated; its magic is a contemporary version of the endless mountain ranges depicted by Chinese ancient landscape masters. For the earthly sphere today, this magic is spoilt by the knowledge that beyond the misty mountains lie industrial towns with chimneys and glass tower blocks. Perhaps for this reason Liu Guosong leaves signs of humanity out of his landscape sceneries.

Another significance of the Space Paintings is their contribution to the discourse of internationalism that prevailed until the 1970s. Space travel made outer space the universal vision of man, hence these cosmic works provided a universal landscape for this vision. If modernism was the universal orthodoxy of that era, then Liu Guosong's cosmic paintings constituted its timeliest cosmic diagram.

After the 1970s, the Space Paintings lost their currency as a symbol of modernism: times were changing and the monolithic internationalism led by the United States was gradually overtaken by the plurality of post-modernism and regionalism. In the 1980s Liu Guosong continued with abstract technical experiments, eventually applying them to his new natural landscapes that started to appear in the mid-1980s. Although from the point of view of traditional landscape he continued to be experimental, in terms of being a modernist trailblazer he had withdrawn from the front. In the 1980s he also started to shift away from the West and looked toward a new platform of discourse. He started to return to the Chinese art world, and specifically began to engage in mainland China's art scene. In 1983 Liu Guosong became the earliest Taiwan artist to be honored with an officially endorsed exhibition in China. Official acceptance of Liu Guosong's modern art also signified the opening of art policies; thus the pioneer of Modern Ink Painting also became the pioneer in bringing together two modernisms—Western modernism and socialist modernism.

Returning to the traditional theme of natural landscape presents its own problems, the major difficulty being that Nature no longer offers the same refuge. The mysterious realm that sheltered the hermit has been rudely exposed, and the very concept of Nature has also been transformed by the filter lens of environmental protection, exploitation, tourism, and pollution. Nature can no longer harbor escape and transcendence as it is no longer larger than our consciousness. It is not even as coherent and overarching a concept as that of modernism in the years of internationalism. The Nature to which Liu Guosong returned in the 1980s was splintered, just as pluralism had become the new orthodoxy of modernism.

In the past two decades Liu Guosong made two renewed efforts to push landscape art further forward: the *Tibet* series and the *Jiuzhaigou* series. Among his numerous travels in China after his 1983 exhibition, Liu Guosong was most impressed by his ascent to the Tibetan Himalayas in 1987, and for many years afterwards he made the snow-capped peaks of the Tibetan highlands his theme. This became the artist's other major "landscape" breakthrough after the earlier Space Paintings. What is common between the two themes is that they both represent geographical frontiers, accessible to the select few but not usually trespassed. They also both represent terrains of purity where the imagination can find refuge. The snow-capped mountains are also the final mountainous frontier of Liu Guosong. (The later series of *Jiuzhaigou* paintings only looks at aquatic reflections in the famous lake of Jiuzhaigou). In recent years the artist is less actively engaged in debates about contemporary painting, and has produced fewer commentaries about art in this era of excessive information. Perhaps Liu Guosong is waiting for new inspiration. The *Jiuzhaigou* series of recent years echoes an attitude of the early 1980s: in both periods he made abundant abstract experiments, and seems to escape into a world of luminous colors, where light and rippling patterns soothe the mind and make room for meditation. His *Jiuzhaigou* series eschews specificity of detail as regards the natural beauty of this scenic site; instead, the artist only gives us the reflections on the surface of its lake. He seems to imply that natural beauty is insufficient for enveloping the mind of the modern man; this is a realm for spiritual cultivation, for rest and not expansion.

Historically for China's literati, calligraphy-painting has been a realm of refuge from the world of social strife and earthly duties. It was once a tangible realm, a real space jointly cultivated by Nature and art. Since the industrial age, this tangible realm has altered its appearance, and its magic as a destination for the imagination has also been spoiled beyond repair. If the spirit of Chinese traditional landscape is to continue, then the responsibilities for its modern heirs are not merely the preservation of its styles, but the building of a believable arcadia that the modern imagination can accept. It needs to be a complete world that elevates modern life, not fragmented hideaways. This ambitious mission should not be the responsibility of a single artist, nor even an entire generation. The contribution of Liu Guosong over an active career of sixty years, a complete Chinese cosmic cycle, has already been enormous. From the start he realized that the modernization of calligraphy-painting has to be the concerted effort of many dedicated artists, and that its success would benefit not only the Chinese heritage but the culture of all mankind. In evaluating Liu Guosong's career it is therefore equally important to point to his role as the dedicated moving force of an art movement. He has put new life into ink painting and pushed forward scholarly research. His art, as the heir

of *shuhua*, calligraphy-painting, has filled in a modern chapter missing from tradition and history. In presenting this exhibition, the Palace Museum has endorsed the efforts of modern ink painters, and expanded the vision of the heritage. This exhibition coincides with the 75th birthday of Liu Guosong, an auspicious occasion that deserves true celebration.

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## UNIVERSE IN THE MIND: THE ART AND THOUGHT OF LIU KUO-SUNG

2007

EXCERPTED AND REVISED VERSION, 2021

**IN THE EARLY 1970S**, Liu Kuo-sung coined the term “modern ink painting” to underscore the concept that the modern transformation of Chinese painting must be built upon the foundation of traditional ink painting.<sup>1</sup> Through years of artistic creation and dedicated teaching, Liu formulated his position on modern ink painting, and in the process ignited strong responses across the Chinese artistic community.

Recognizing that he first had to break through the narrow ideological confines of traditional *bimo* (brush-and-ink), Liu consequently proposed the ideas that “the brush is the dots and lines, the ink is the surface and colors,” and “*cun* is the texture.”<sup>2</sup> He emphasized that Chinese painting’s fundamental elements of dot, line, color, surface, and texture can be achieved not only by means of traditional brush and ink and texturing methods, but also that new and diverse effects could be produced by employing the varied techniques of modern painting. Therefore, he advocated a “revolution against the brush,” stating his belief that: “Although the brush is a very good painting tool, the kinds of dots and lines it can achieve on a surface have already been exhaustively explored by Chinese artists over the last two thousand years. This is equally true of the limited range of texture strokes it can produce. So why not seek another path? This is the starting point in my pursuit of ‘modern ink painting.’”<sup>3</sup>

Liu also challenged the practice of emulation in the form of copying from ancient models, pointing out that while the ancients’ *cun* texturing techniques are the basis for traditional brush techniques, innovative painters could establish their own technical standards. Therefore, he believed that in the creation of modern ink painting, one must grasp the guiding principle of “seek first to be unique, and then to be excellent” (*xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao*). In other words, an artist’s time and energy should not be wasted on the dull practice of copying. Rather, one should begin by painting something that is different from the norm; once this has been achieved, one should then work tirelessly to refine one’s technique until it reaches a high standard. Liu further emphasized the concept of using special techniques to “produce” a painting, thoroughly subverting the established system of traditional brush and ink. [*bimo*]. He said: “I appeal to all modern ink painters, that from now on in signing their works, they use the term ‘produced by so-and-so,’ for we have now arrived at a new era that belongs to us.”<sup>4</sup>

Liu also voiced his criticisms regarding the established methods of traditional Chinese painting practice, frequently in published form. In support of his own views on technical innovations in painting, he often quoted from the writings of the eccentric Qing-dynasty painter Shitao (1642–1707): “No method is method, and it is the consummate method”; “Brush is not brush, ink is not ink, painting is not painting; there is only myself.”<sup>5</sup> Actually, Shitao’s concepts on painting were clearly influenced by the Chan Buddhist idea of “imprint the method with one’s heart, imprint one’s heart

with the method.” As Huineng (638–713), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, said: “He who realizes the Essence of the Mind may dispense with such doctrines as Bodhi, Nirvana, and ‘Knowledge of Emancipation.’ Only those who do not inherit or possess a single system of Law can formulate all systems of Law....It makes no difference to those who have realized the Essence of the Mind whether they formulate all systems of Law or dispense with all of them. They are at liberty to come or to go. They are free from obstacles or impediments. They take appropriate actions as circumstances require. They give suitable answers according to the temperament of the inquirer. They see with a comprehensive glance that all Nirvana-kayas are one with the Essence of the Mind. They attain liberation, psychic powers, and Samadhi, which enable them to perform the arduous task of universal salvation, as easily as if they were only playing. Such are the men who have realized the Essence of the Mind.”<sup>6</sup>

This is also precisely the state Liu Kuo-sung has sought to attain through artistic creation. As he wrote: “How freeing it is, to involve one’s body and mind completely in creativity, disregarding the established rules of one’s predecessors. Even if it is not what the traditionalists think of as brush and ink, even if no one even sees it as a painting, the artist will not care, for it is good as long as it expresses the true intention of his heart.”<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen from within the history of Chinese painting, this type of creative attitude, where “ten thousand methods reside in one’s mind,” came to fruition in the Chan painting of the Song dynasty (960–1279). For example, monk-painters such as Fachang (Muqi Fachang, fl. 13th century) used sugarcane sediment and bunches of grass to create a painting; Zeren used a cloth to paint pine trees; Zhirong (1114–1193) used chewed sugarcane and broken brushes to paint sloping rock formations; while Ziwen (Wen Riguan, 13th century) would drink to his heart’s content while his hand painted grapes and other subjects in the splashed ink method.<sup>8</sup> These free and untrammeled creative methods are all, beyond a doubt, precedents for the innovative techniques of modern ink painting.

Liu Kuo-sung did his utmost to advocate modern ink painting, and created his own methods, including his signature techniques of paper rubbing, plucking out fibers from the paper surface (*choujin bopi*), water rubbing (*shuituo*), and steeped ink (*zimo*). Moreover, he was always eager to teach others the methods and the knowledge that he himself gained through these processes. As a result of his efforts, a “technical revolution” soon arose within the Chinese art scene on the mainland.

In 1985, the publication *The Construction of Liu Kuo-sung’s Art*, authored by Zhou Shaohua, introduced Liu’s diverse techniques in modern ink painting to a wider mainland audience through both text and extensive images.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the book featured Liu Kuo-sung’s experimentations with the steeped-ink painting



FIG 1 Liu Kuo-sung (Liu Guosong, b. 1932), *Branches of a Confucian Temple*, 1986  
Ink and color on paper, 13.39 × 13.39 in (34 × 34 cm). Private Collection, Taiwan

technique, a method which involves wetting sheets of overlapping paper to allow air bubbles to form between the sheets; then ink is added along the periphery of the bubbles, and allowed to soak into the paper to mix with the water. After the paper dries, interesting color gradations and textural effects are formed. The composition of his 1986 painting, *Branches of a Confucian Temple* (Fig. 1), was structured on the naturally fibrous forms created through the steeped ink method, to which sky blue and ochre colors were applied to create the image of ancient tree branches crisscrossing against the sky. After several years of constant study and experimentation, Liu Kuo-sung gained mastery of the steeped ink technique. At the same time, he continued his work with his water rubbing technique as well as his earlier painting methods, as can be seen in two major commissioned works of the late 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Liu's *Scenery of Hong Kong*, a thirteen-meter-long handscroll completed in 1987 (Fig. 2), uses a comparatively more realistic style to portray Hong Kong's beautiful ocean views; while the 1989 work *Source*, a monumental 19-meter-high landscape painting, depicts the majestic scene of a waterfall flowing down from a snowy mountain peak.



FIG 2 Liu Kuo-sung, *Scenery of Hong Kong*, 1987  
Ink and color on paper, handscroll,  
18.23 × 503.15 in (46.3 × 1278 cm)  
Private collection, Taiwan

FIG 3 Liu Kuo-sung  
*Contemplation of Rocks*, 1989  
Ink and color on paper  
54.13 × 11.42 in (137.5 × 29 cm)





FIG 4 Liu Kuo-sung, *Forest of Ice Pagodas*, 1990

Ink and color on paper, 12.01 × 37.01 in (30.5 × 94 cm). Cheng Huai House Collection, Taiwan

By the end of the 1980s, Liu's increasing mastery of the steeped ink technique resulted in the creation of a number of stunning works using this method. *Contemplation of Rocks* (Fig. 3), completed in 1989, possesses an exceptional layered effect which never could have been envisioned by traditionalist ink painters. A *Forest of Ice Pagodas* of 1990 (Fig. 4) exudes an expressive fullness of ink matched with an exuberance of natural textures. In *Drizzling Wind at Night* of 1992, Liu has added a number of tightly spaced splashed-ink dots to the steeped ink and color surface, that seem to dissipate into the flowing water, evoking a poetic image of evening rain falling into a lotus pond. Liu's *Heaven's Gate* (Fig 5) of the same year borrows from the compositional structure of his earlier *Monument* series of the 1960s, in which the faint form of a stone stele appears the upper part of the painting, while the lower part is occupied by expressive ink formations that resemble Liu's earlier calligraphic-style works. The entire image utilizes a highly saturated steeped ink technique, creating the visual effect of rising air and smoky mist. These visual effects, together with the inherent profundity of the title, *Heaven's Gate*, infuse the work with a poetic mood that recalls lines from a poem by Du Fu: "The Primordial breath blows, infusing his painting with moisture / At the maker's command, the heavens respond with weeping."<sup>11</sup>

While Liu Kuo-sung's various proposals for modern ink painting became increasingly popular in China's art scene from the early 1990s onwards, there still remained many traditionalists who questioned them, criticizing what they saw as too much of a focus on new techniques and form while neglecting content. In response to these criticisms, Liu Kuo-sung wrote: "The painting's content and its form can appear to be two independent terms, but in reality, they are two sides of a whole, and essentially cannot be separated. The conceptual realm (or content) of painting can be expressed only through dots, lines, surface, colors, and textures. It is completely different from literature, which uses words to express notions."<sup>12</sup>

FIG 5 Liu Kuo-sung, *Heaven's Gate*, 1992

Ink and color on paper

72.44 × 36.22 in (184 × 92 cm)

Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong



月流雲淡如感夙心

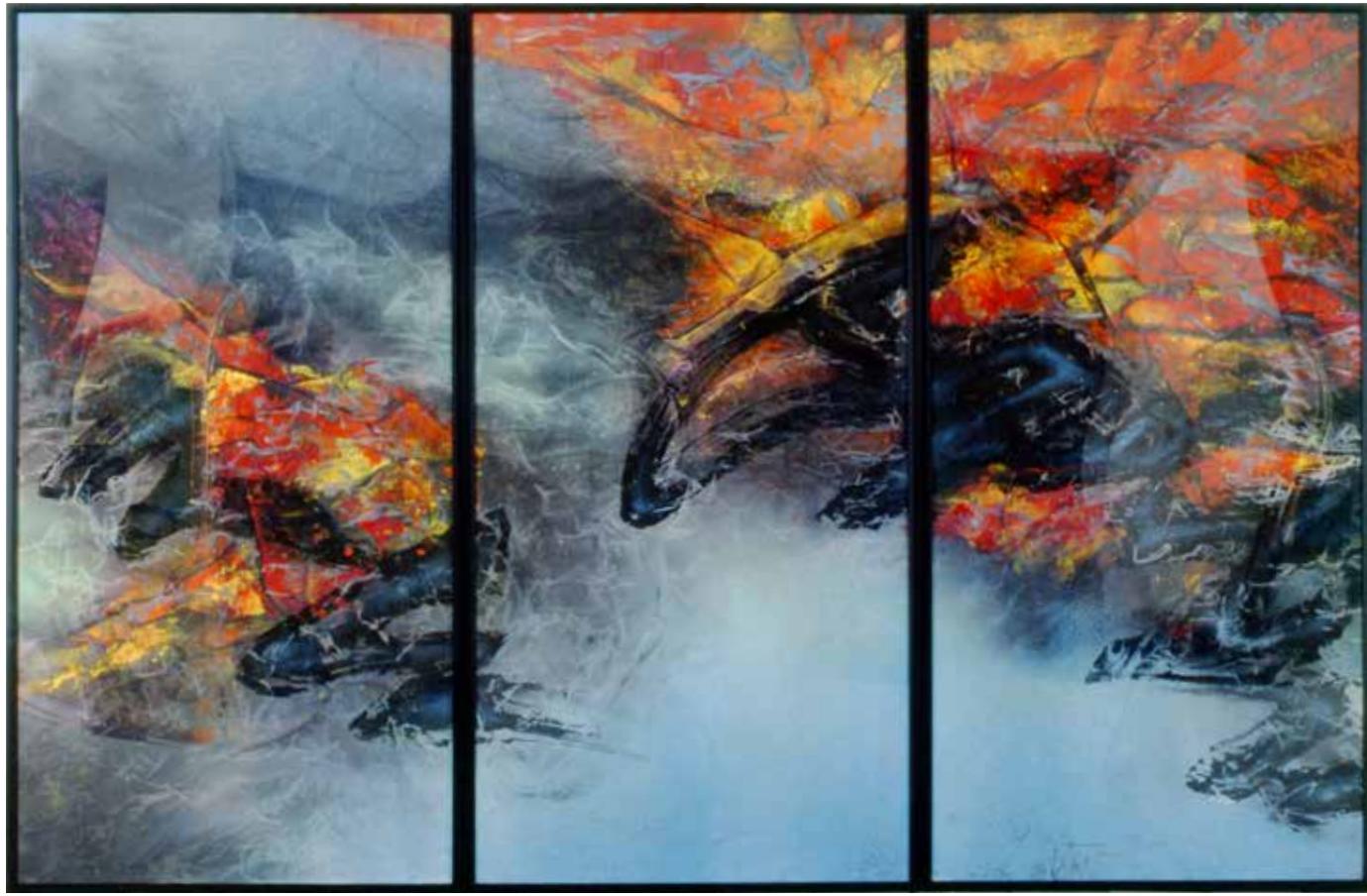


FIG 6 Liu Kuo-sung, *Memory of Autumn*, 1993  
Ink and color on paper, 71.65 × 107.48 in (182 × 273 cm)

Liu Kuo-sung had already established this formalist artistic point of view in the early 1960s, stating: "Every artist is in pursuit of creative form. When the artist creates a unique kind of form that belongs only to him, then the form is already in possession of its content. It is unlike the general consensus where people believe that it is the content that is painting's form or its expressed meaning."<sup>13</sup>

During Liu's participation in the 1992 Shenzhen International Ink Painting Exhibition and Symposium, he engaged in a debate with art critic Lang Shaojun regarding modern ink painting's emphasis on "production."<sup>14</sup> He opposed a narrow concept of traditional brush-and-ink, and in a paper for the symposium publication he stated: "The emphasis traditional painters place on 'brush-and-ink' is the basis of literati painting, but it is unnecessary for modern ink painters. What is necessary for modern ink painters is a broad concept of brush and ink, innovative and individualistic *cun* methods, and repeated practice to solidify and establish a foundation for one's own painting style."<sup>15</sup>

In 1992, at the age of sixty, Liu Kuo-sung retired from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and moved back to Taiwan. Aside from continuing to teach at universities in Taiwan, he frequently traveled between China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to promote modern ink painting. Liu proposed the idea of holding the "Modern Ink Painting Exhibition" and symposium in 1994 at the Taiwan Provincial Museum of Art (now known as the National Taiwan Museum of Art). The following year he gathered a group of like-minded painters and established the Found Group, for which he served as president. In "The Responsibility of the Found Group," Liu stated: "It seems a fact that the next century will be

the century of East Asia; thus the promotion of the Eastern style of ink painting is our historical mission as duty-bound Chinese artists. The 'Found Group' camaraderie will take this moment's important task upon their shoulders, determinedly vow to create a body of great art and to establish a comprehensive set of aesthetics, which will allow the younger generation of artists in the West and other places of the world to echo and follow."<sup>16</sup> Liu's departure from Hong Kong when it was still a British colony, to return to the land where he had struggled to establish his home and career in his early years, further stirred his national consciousness and cultural sentiments.

Following his return to Taiwan, Liu's creative work deepened and matured, achieving a kind of comprehensive expressiveness through the amalgamation of diverse styles and methods developed by the artist at different periods. For example, his 1993 work *Memory of Autumn* (Fig. 6), comprised of three connected screens, combined his earlier large, sweeping brushwork and ripped paper fiber technique with his recently developed method of steeped ink and color. The resulting composition, consisting of layers of different tones and textures, is vibrant with color and feeling. In the 1994 work *Rhythm of the Sea* (Fig. 7), Liu abandoned the otherworldly mystique of his works of the 1980s, instead adding color washes to the natural veins created by the water rubbing in such a way as to emphasize the surface's flatness and purity. In *Spring Hills beyond a Rain-Splattered Window* of 1995 (Fig. 8), Liu further experimented with the process of adding new features to the original steeped ink effects, often by breaking apart or deconstructing the surface. In this work, Liu superimposed a rectangular checkerboard pattern over the steeped ink ground, creating a

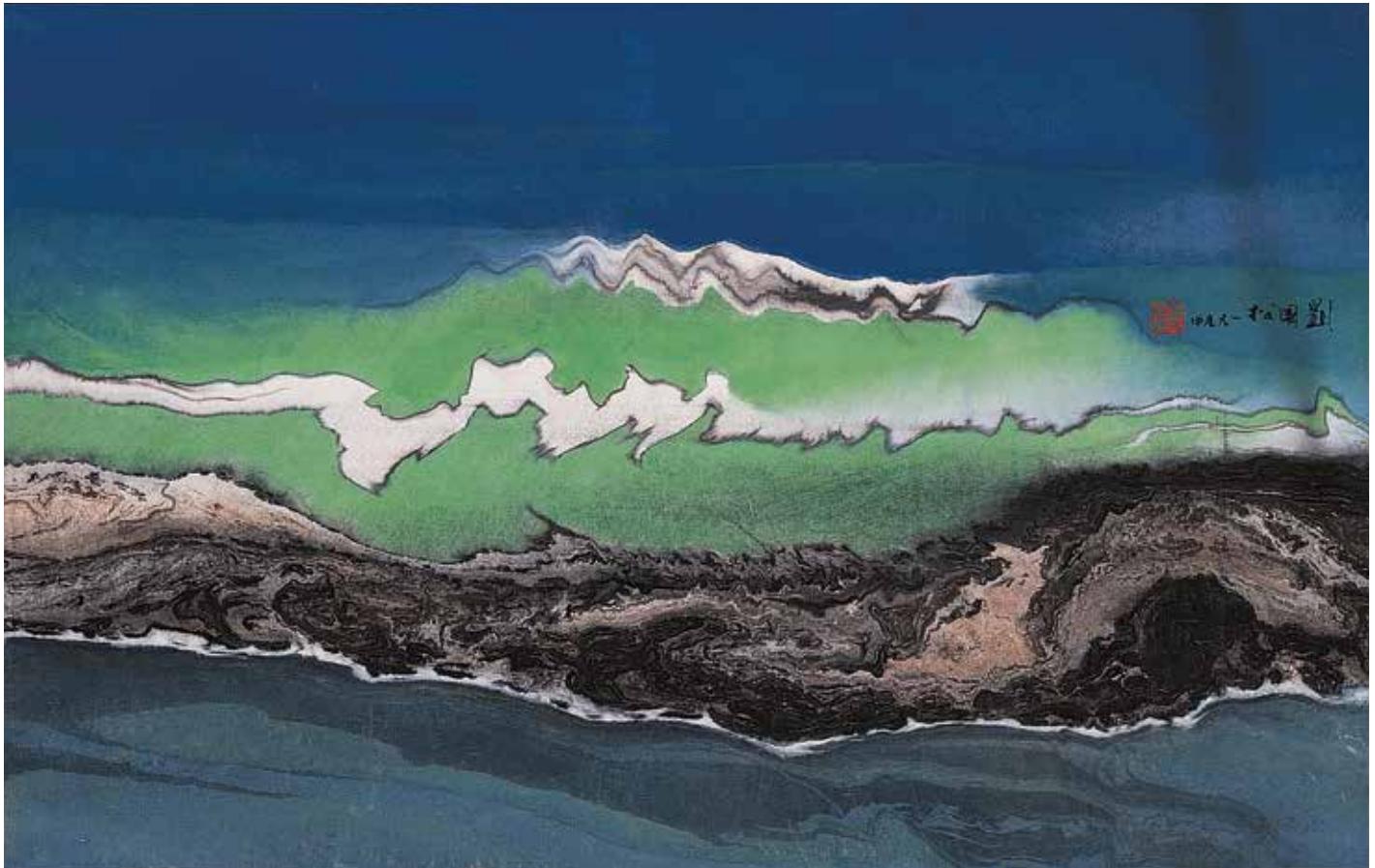


FIG 7 Liu Kuo-sung, *Rhythm of the Sea*, 1994  
Ink and color on paper, 17.32 × 27.24 in (44 × 69.2 cm). Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan

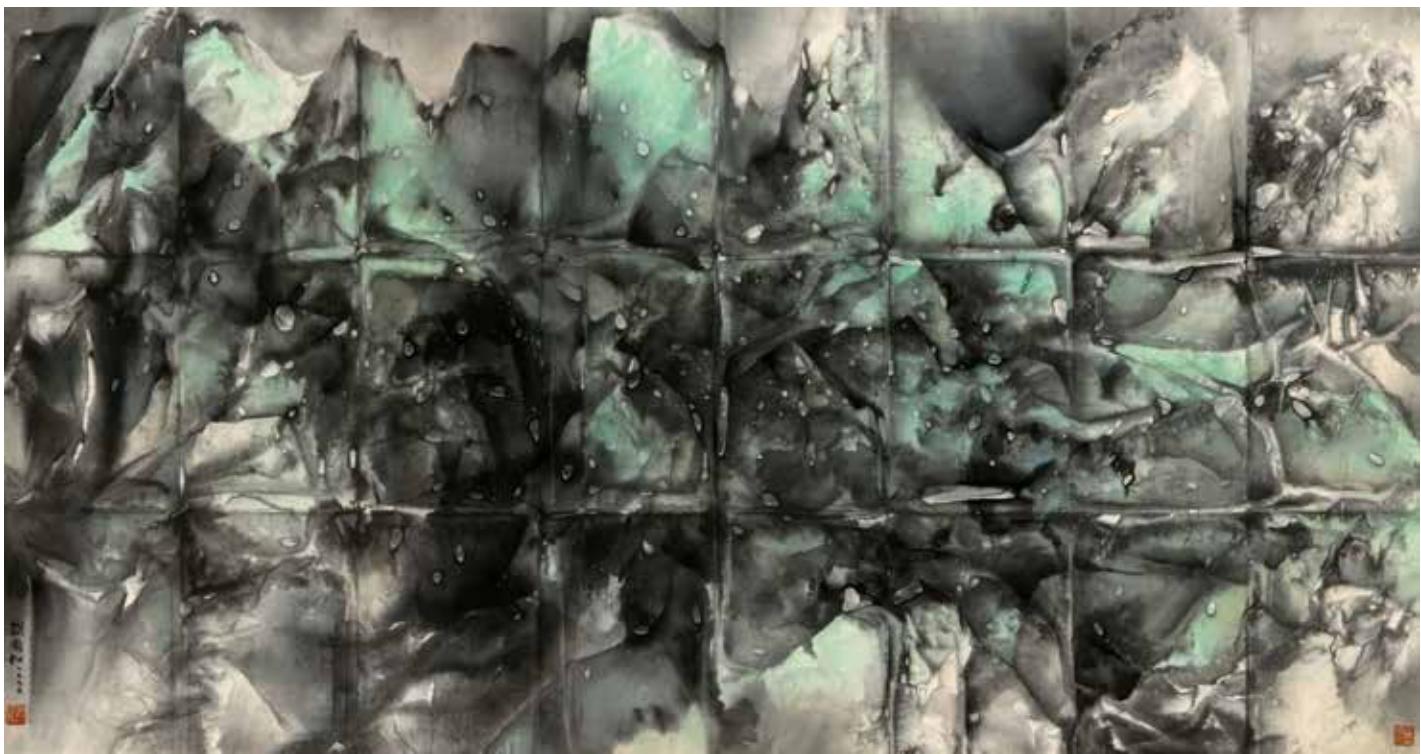
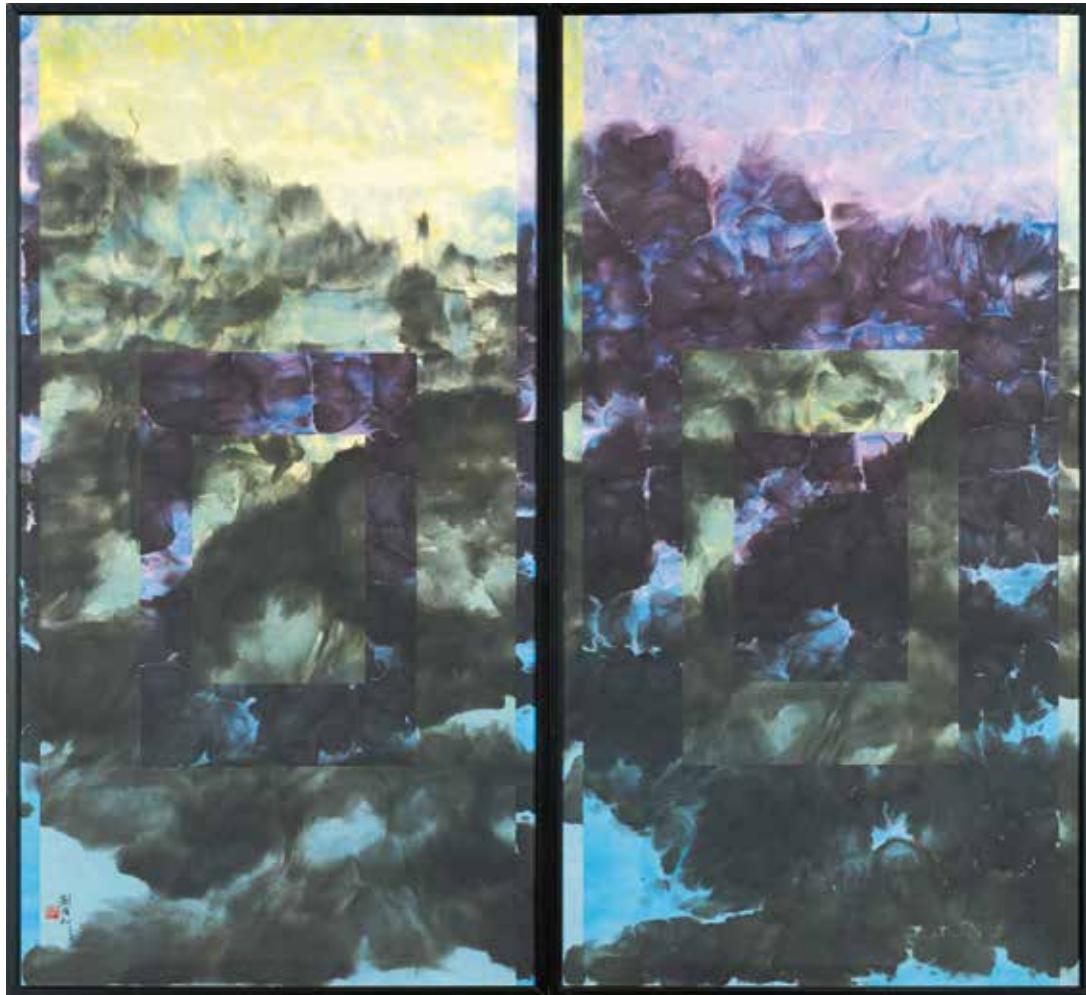


FIG 8 Liu Kuo-sung, *Spring Hills beyond a Rain-Splattered Window*, 1995  
Ink and color on paper, 37.40 × 69.69 in (95 × 177 cm)  
Collection of Hsueh-Tu Lu, Taiwan



**FIG 9** Liu Kuo-sung  
*I am in You, You are in Me*, 1995  
Ink and color with collage on paper,  
70.87 × 78.74 in (180 × 200 cm)  
Collection of Shandong Museum



**FIG 10** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Free Spirit*, 1992  
Ink and color on paper,  
28.74 × 63.39 in (73 × 161 cm)



**FIG 11** Liu Kuo-sung  
*Democratic Spirit*, 1996  
Ink and color on paper,  
29.53 × 63.39 in (75 × 161 cm)

visual effect similar to mosaic, and a pleasing sense of the landscape being viewed through the panes of a glass window. This method of surface deconstruction and collage can also be seen in his 1995 work *I am in You, You are in Me* (Fig. 9). Since the steeped ink process leaves a similar ink imprint on both folded sheets of paper, Liu created a sense of differentiation by dying the two sheets in different colors. He then cut sections out from each sheet, pasting them back onto the surface interchangeably, producing a rich and arresting visual form. Liu continued to develop new works derived from this unique method of surface deconstruction and collage. For the work *Free Spirit*, completed in 1992 (Fig. 10), Liu connected three separate paintings together to create a compositional structure evoking the Chinese character *zhu* 主, the second character in the Chinese word for "democracy" (*minzhu* 民主). This same compositional technique of combining several smaller paintings into a structure evoking the character *zhu* and the theme of democracy is seen in a related work, *Democratic Spirit*, which Liu painted in 1996 (Fig. 11). It should be noted that Liu created this artwork the year before the end of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. For the artist, the image represents both his sense of grievance for the sacrifices and suffering in China's history, and the hopes that his fellow countrymen will break free from the shackles of Western colonialism and achieve true national democracy.

Perhaps among the most extraordinary of the artworks created during this period are two paintings from 1997, *Absurd Pyramid* and *Skyscraper of Art* (Fig. 12), each of which is composed of a multitude of small triangular panels joined together to create two respective different configurations. In the same year that he completed these works, Liu officially ended his half-century long teaching career, with his retirement from his position as Director of the Research Institute of Plastic Art at Tainan Art Institute (present-day Tainan Art University). Full of emotion, he created these two works as expressive vehicles for his pedagogical ideas. Liu Kuo-sung disagreed with a fundamental principle of traditional painting education, that "learning is like a pyramid," [promoting the mastery of an array of established techniques]. In contrast, Liu believed that an overemphasis on training in basic techniques can smother students' development of their own imaginative and artistic powers. Thus he offered an alternative model that "learning is like a skyscraper." He explained: "The foundation of modern buildings is laid underground, seeking depth rather than vastness. The deeper the foundation, the taller the building. In the same way, the modern artist does not need to master a whole range of techniques or to know how to paint everything, but he must know how to paint something that is different. The more innovative your techniques, then with continual and repeated practice, your individual style will emerge and become more distinct, and your paintings will achieve greater refinement and depth. As a result of this, your position will naturally rise and you will be head and shoulders above others."<sup>17</sup>

In 1999 Liu Kuo-sung created the seminal work *19th Century, 20th Century, 21st Century* (Fig. 13), an extension of his so-called "Space Painting" (*taikonghua*) style, which he debuted in the late 1960s. This painting reflects an intention on the part of the artist to express his individual ideology. A monumental work composed of eleven connected screens, it features a series of spherical celestial forms which are filled with symbolic meaning. In both the upper and lower register of the composition, there is a field in the form of a large arc, with the upper arc being the inverse of the



**FIG 12** Liu Kuo-sung, *Skyscraper of Art*, 1997  
Ink and color on paper, 122.05 × 39.37 in (310 × 100 cm)  
Collection of Shandong Museum



FIG 13 Liu Kuo-sung, *19th Century, 20th Century, 21st Century*, 1999

Ink and color with collage on paper, 73.23 x 195.67 in (186 x 497 cm)

lower. These arcs represent European and American power, respectively, and the might of the Western world. The middle ground of the composition features repeated images of a red celestial body symbolizing China and Chinese culture, moving gradually from left to right, or from the 19th century on to the 20th and 21st centuries. Due to the pressure of the huge force fields above and below it, the red celestial sphere is gradually compressed and by the center of the painting has assumed the shape of an oblate spheroid. This is a metaphor for the historical state of the Chinese nation in the 20th century, oppressed by Western colonialism and hegemony. Gradually, however, the spherical form begins to expand again as it moves to the right, suggesting that in the 21st century China will renew its national culture and political power. In an essay written in 1998, one year before the completion of this painting, Liu stated: "The 20th century was identified with American life; Western culture continues to be exported to other countries worldwide by means of its overwhelming advantages....Western specialists recognize the promise of East Asia, and believe that the 21st century will belong to East Asia. Some people even believe that the 21st century will be the Chinese century."<sup>18</sup>

With the approach of the "Chinese century," Liu Kuo-sung expressed his conviction that contemporary Chinese artists must resolutely reject Western hegemonic culture, making the rediscovery and propagation of the values of Chinese traditional culture their top priority. He consequently re-emphasized a viewpoint that he has held for many years: "For more than a century, my country has been disgraced by the ships and guns of the big Western powers; and European and American advancement in technology caused us to lose both confidence and dignity. For some time there was ideological confusion and the nation's spirit was dimmed. We became a slave of Western culture, and a colony of Western-style painting, while our artists became the cheering squad for European and American cultures."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, the art scene from the mid-1990s onward was influenced by a politicized "Taiwanese consciousness" that was gradually spreading throughout the island. This fostered a negative interpretation of the national sensibility behind "Chinese painting" and "ink painting." Moreover, it promoted the international style of European and American modern art to resist

Chinese cultural traditions. This was partly the result of a society that increasingly fawned over the Western, but in larger part was due to extremist politics which promoted a sense of provincialism or "localism." Liu Kuo-sung lamented: "After the period of Restoration, ink painting once again returned to Taiwan. But there were some people with ulterior motives who, in order to achieve their political goals, insisted that ink painting was synonymous with 'mainland painting' and did not belong on Taiwanese soil. Then, what about the kind of imitative art that was always following popular Western trends? Such ersatz products were once ridiculed as 'foreign brands, but 'Made in Taiwan.'"<sup>20</sup> Liu firmly believed that modern ink painting is built on the foundation of traditional culture, and as such is the true "local painting," belonging equally to both Taiwan and mainland China.

Following his retirement from teaching in 1999, Liu Kuo-sung had more time both for his creative work and for travelling. He began to visit mainland China more frequently, where he participated in a variety of activities and travelled to many different parts of the country. Liu was deeply affected by his travel experiences, and expressed his feelings through the creation of a series of works integrating the full range of his innovative techniques, and which he called his "Chinese landscapes." In 2000, Liu also took advantage of the opportunity to lecture in Tibet to view the stunning snowy mountains of the Himalayas. On a visit to Mount Everest, Liu was mesmerized by the beautiful scenery, but the extreme cold and the high altitude caused him to fall ill from altitude sickness and as a result he lost hearing in his left ear. Although he paid a high price for this experience, the unrivalled beauty of Tibet's soaring wintry mountainscapes inspired him to create the *Tibet Series*, a large number of paintings completed over several years. In one of his representative works from this series, *Silvery Woods Amidst Cloudy Mountains* of 2000, Liu combined broad and sweeping brushwork with his ripped paper fiber technique to evoke the magnificence of the Tibetan peaks. The image is strewn with broken traces of white, like the sun reflecting on the white snow and winding over the mountains like silver serpents. In *Play of Mountain and Cloud* of 2002 (Fig. 14) Liu employed a bird's-eye view, causing the landscape to appear wide open and emphasizing the vastness and magnificence of the mountains. *Pangboqi*, completed in the same year, is an example of a landscape in which

Liu utilized the traditional “deep distance” method, causing the valleys and streams to zigzag together amidst layer upon layer of extended mountains, creating a deeply profound and remote realm of artistic conception.

Although in these works Liu Kuo-sung made use of the large, sweeping brushstrokes and pulled paper fiber technique common to his work of the 1960s, the visual handling of the images now appears even more refined and complete. At this time he abandoned his earlier, more abstract style, and his landscapes now tended to be more realistically rendered and his painting style more robust and stable. This development is evident in *Quiet Night, Snowy Mountain* of 2005 and *Hailuogou Glacier* of 2006 (Figs. 15 and 16). Both paintings evince a compelling sense of power, giving the viewer the uncanny feeling of being in the presence of a real mountain. Simultaneous to the creation of these paintings, Liu was also producing compositions using methods divergent to those of the *Tibet Series*. In works such as *Inja Kosi* of 2004, Liu used non-absorbent paper to perform the steeped ink and color method, producing textures that were comparatively brighter and more refined than those he was able to create with absorbent *xuan* or cotton papers. Through this technique, Liu’s wintry landscapes appear particularly crystalline and brilliant.

This type of steeped ink painting utilizing non-absorbent paper first emerged in Liu’s *Jiuzhaigou Series* at the beginning of 2001.

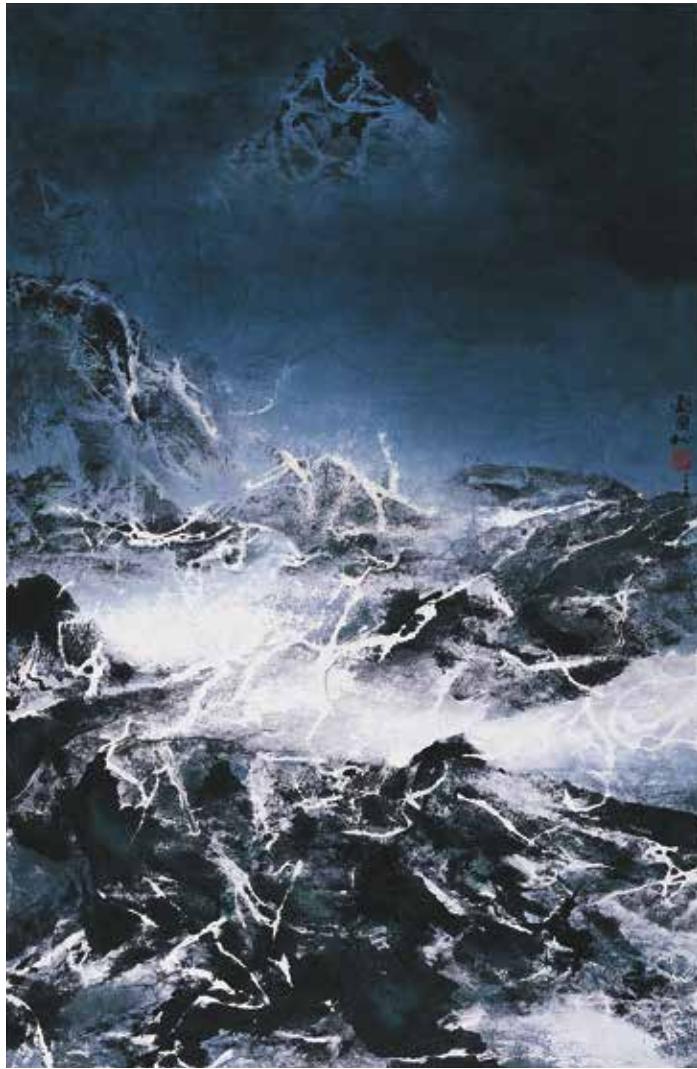


FIG 15 Liu Kuo-sung, *Quiet Night, Snowy Mountain: Tibet Series No.80*, 2005  
Ink and color on paper, 36.61 × 24.02 in (93 × 61 cm). Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing



FIG 14 Liu Kuo-sung, *Play of Mountain and Cloud*, 2002  
Ink and color on paper, 47.24 × 59.06 in (120 × 150 cm)

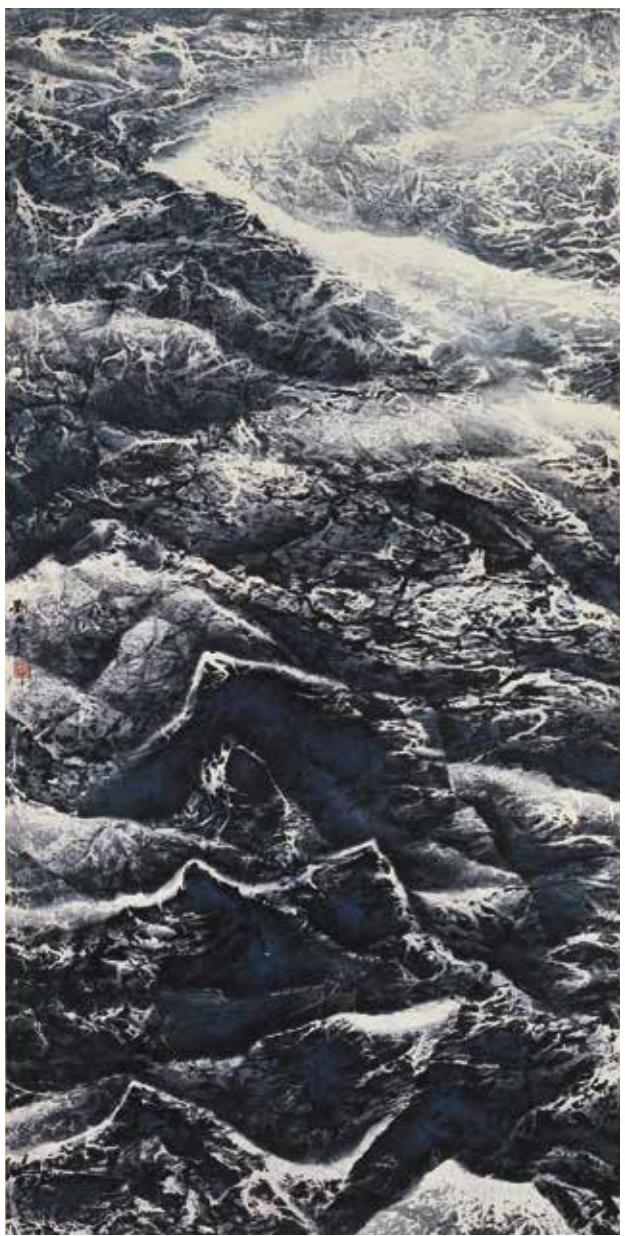


FIG 16 Liu Kuo-sung, *Hailuogou Glacier: Tibet Series No. 85*, 2006  
Ink and color on paper, 72.05 × 35.83 in (183 × 91 cm)



FIG 17 Liu Kuo-sung, *Blue Light on the Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No. 6*, 2001  
Ink and color on paper, 22.05 × 29.33 in (56 × 74.5 cm). The Hong Collection, Taiwan

That year, by way of an invitation to exhibit his work in Chengdu, Sichuan province, Liu seized the opportunity to travel to Sichuan's famous Jiuzhaigou valley, where he was completely intoxicated by that landscape of riotous colors and stunning beauty. This experience inspired Liu to experiment with multiple techniques and materials to capture and express the unique qualities of the Jiuzhaigou landscape, and he ultimately discovered that using architectural drawing paper steeped in ink and colors achieved the kind of expressiveness he was seeking with maximum effect.

*Blue Light on the Ripples* (Fig. 17) of 2001 is the earliest work in Liu's *Jiuzhaigou Series*. Here he first allowed black ink and blue water-based pigments to mingle on the paper's surface, and then gradually dry and congeal, producing an effect of natural textures and luminous hues. Then, through the treatment of his superb brushwork, an image of a beautiful pond of cold, blue crystalline water emerged. In the same year Liu also completed *Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No. 12* (Fig. 18) and *Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No. 13* (Fig. 19), both of which portray a multicolored pond of rainbow hues, glittering with the gentle movement of the water. The layers of textures and colors weave together to create a lovely vision of light reflecting off the trembling ripples, evoking a similar beauty to that of Claude Monet's (1840–1926) *Waterlilies* series, also created in that artist's later years. Other paintings utilizing this kind of luminous steeped ink technique include *Waves in the Autumn Wind*, in which the fine silky lines in orange, yellow, and purplish red hues are set off by the reflection of light upon the water, conveying a flavor of autumn and instilling a sense of deep relaxation in the viewer. By contrast, *Nuorilang Waterfalls* of 2006 is lively and full of excitement as a simmering range of colors reflect off of each other within a vibrant interplay of white lines, achieving a rich abstract flavor as well as the feeling of a real place.

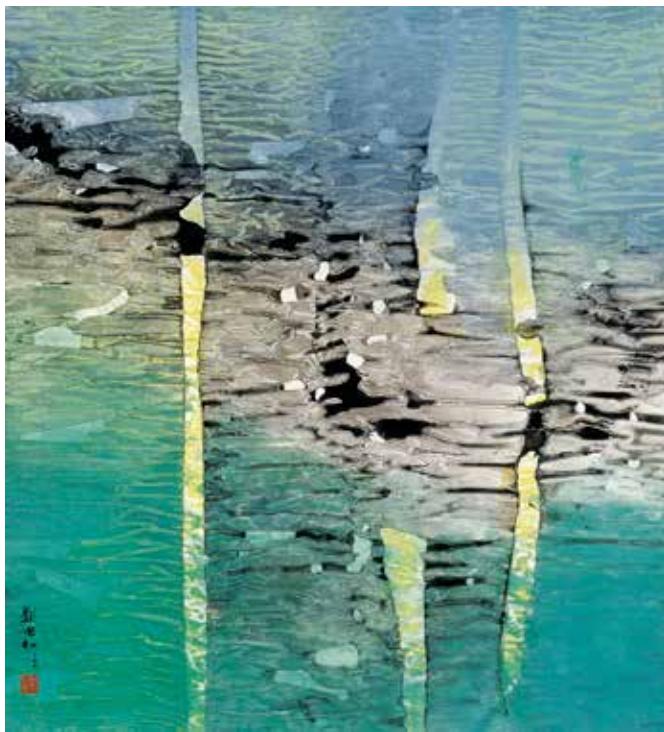


FIG 18 Liu Kuo-sung, *Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No.12*, 2001  
Ink and color on paper, 27.56 × 25.39 in (70 × 64.5 cm). Collection of Hsueh-Tu Lu, Taiwan

In recent years, apart from his travels to Tibet and Jiuzhaigou, Liu has visited many famous landscapes of "mountains and rivers" in China, seeking creative inspiration. After purchasing a villa in Shanghai in 2003, his travels in China became more frequent and extensive. Liu's *Stone Forest in Winter* of 2005 (Fig. 20) was painted following a trip to Yunnan province. Here he also used the





FIG 19 Liu Kuo-sung, *Ripples: Jiuzhaigou Series No.13*, 2001  
Ink and color on paper, 27.95 × 31.10 in (71 × 79 cm). Hong Kong Museum of Art Collection

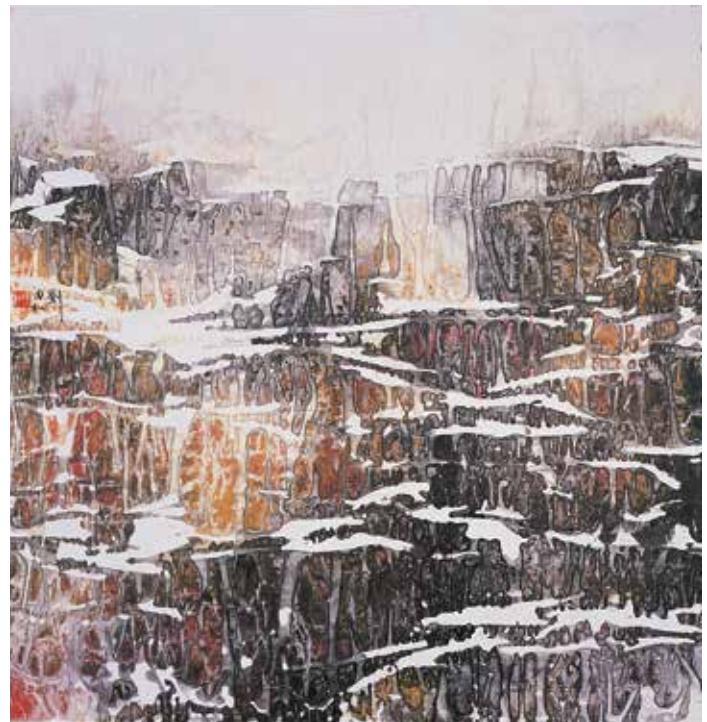


FIG 20 Liu Kuo-sung, *Stone Forest in Winter*, 2005  
Ink and color on paper, 34.65 × 33.31 in (88 × 84.6 cm)

steeped ink and color technique, as well as textural formations of rows of columnar lines and white space, to create the image of a stone forest covered in snow.

Throughout Chinese art history, the painting styles of a number of artists became more sedate, dignified, and stalwart as they reached a venerable age; it seems that Liu Kuo-sung is no

exception. This is fully evident in Liu's *Tianzishan in Summer: Zhangjiajie Series No.9* completed in 2006 (Fig. 21). In this monumental work composed of five connected screens, the profundity of the ink tones and rich colors, together with the beautiful texturing create an effect of grandeur and weight, displaying the strength and power of the rocky mountains and the moist



FIG 21 Liu Kuo-sung  
*Tianzishan in Summer*  
*Zhangjiajie Series No.9*,  
2006  
Ink and color on paper,  
71.77 × 178.35 in  
(182.3 × 453 cm).  
Collection of the Palace  
Museum, Beijing

richness of the grass and trees. The work contains the kind of timeless serenity immortalized in the phrase "still mountains of remote antiquity."

From Yunnan's Stone Forest in winter to Hunan's Zhangjiajie in summer, Liu Kuo-sung can be said to have depicted the many facets of China's famous landscapes in every season. He once again took up the subject of "the four seasons" in 2006, completing two fine albums. His *Four Seasons Album A* (Fig. 22), consists of eight album leaves painted with vertical landscape images, and

ordered consecutively in pairs; early spring and late spring, early summer and late summer, early autumn and late autumn, early winter and late winter. In creating these compositions, Liu used a combination of paper rubbing, water rubbing and steeped ink and color techniques, together with his masterly brushwork and application of color washes. The result is an album that fully expresses his different feelings about each season. Interestingly, while most of these paintings continue his earlier more impressionistic techniques of water rubbing and steeped ink, the two



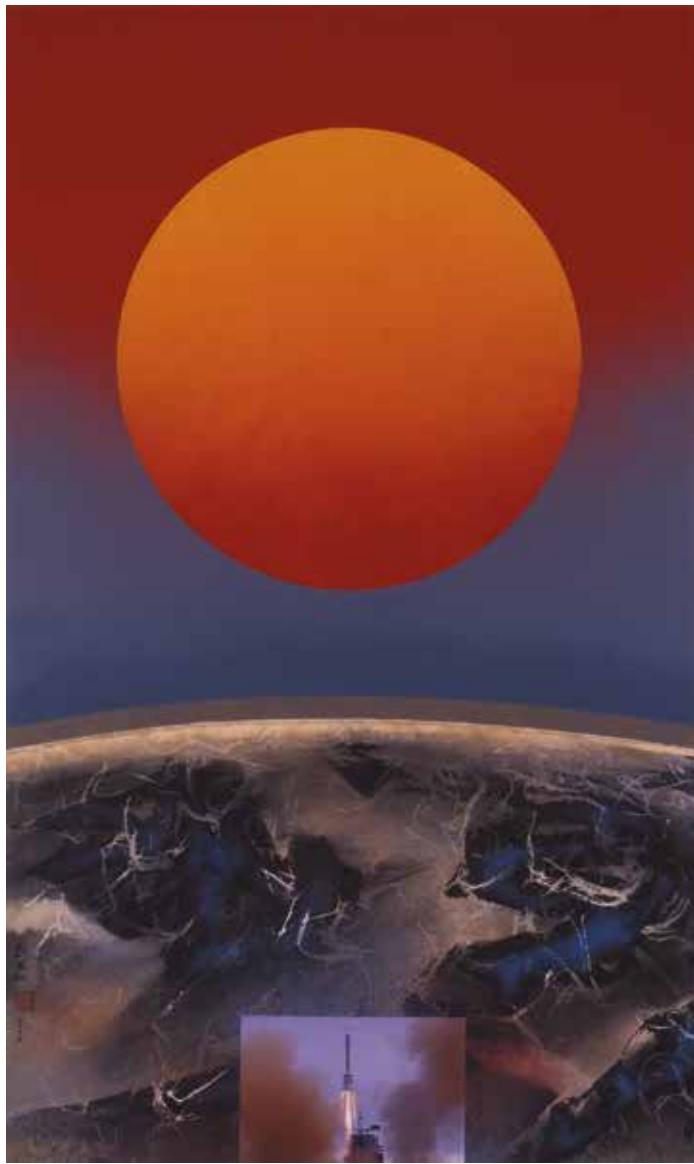
**FIG 22** Liu Kuo-sung, *Four Seasons Album A*, 2006  
Ink and color on paper, album, 15.75 x 11.81 in (40 x 30 cm) each



**FIG 23** Liu Kuo-sung, *Four Seasons Album B*, 2006  
Ink and color on paper, album, 15.75 x 11.81 in (40 x 30 cm) each

leaves portraying springtime are more direct depictions of landscape forms. *Four Seasons Album B* (Fig. 23) composed of eight small horizontal paintings, also demonstrates Liu's use of a variety of techniques to express the myriad changes of the four seasons. This album's style is rather abstract and closer to that of his late 1999 *Four Seasons Series*; however, rather than combining small pictures to form a large composition, here he chose instead to mount the images into a traditional Chinese album format.

In recent years Liu Kuo-sung also has been producing more works in his "Space Painting" idiom, inspired by China's technological developments in space travel. In October 2003, the spacecraft "Shenzhou V" was successfully launched from Jiuquan in Inner Mongolia, making China only the third country in the world, after the United States and Russia, to send people into space. Two years later, "Shenzhou VI" completed an even more ambitious mission, further securing China's position in the field of space technology. These great accomplishments, symbolizing China's rise, captured the hearts of the entire country. Liu Kuo-sung felt equally moved, and at the end of 2005, he created a series of works called *Shenzhou 6* to express his pride as a Chinese citizen. In one of these works, titled *Launch* (Fig. 24), Liu utilized the



**FIG 24** Liu Kuo-sung, *Launch: Shenzhou 6 No. 1*, 2005  
Mixed media, 59.06 x 35.04 in (150 x 89 cm)

standard composition of his Space Paintings, placing a circle above and an arc below; but this time, in the lower center section of the composition, he pasted a digital photograph showing the moment Shenzhou VI was launched. Another painting in this series, *Announcement* (Fig. 25), has a more complex compositional structure. In addition to the basic geometric shapes of circle and arc, Liu added another small circle, positioned between the two, to represent the sun. In the top center of the painting, Liu then pasted a photograph of the interior cabin of "Shenzhou VI," showing the two astronauts reporting back to Earth. Liu Kuo-sung's placement of this photograph above the two celestial spheres symbolizes China's successful completion of this magnificent feat of conquering outer space.

Witnessing the rising power of the Chinese nation, Liu Kuo-sung's confidence in the development of modern ink painting has also continued to deepen. In a 2004 essay he stated: "If the 21st century is ushering in a world where the Chinese will take the lead, then as a result, the economy will rise, the military



**FIG 25** Liu Kuo-sung, *Announcement: Shenzhou 6 No. 2*, 2005  
Mixed media, 75 x 37.20 in (190.5 x 94.5 cm)

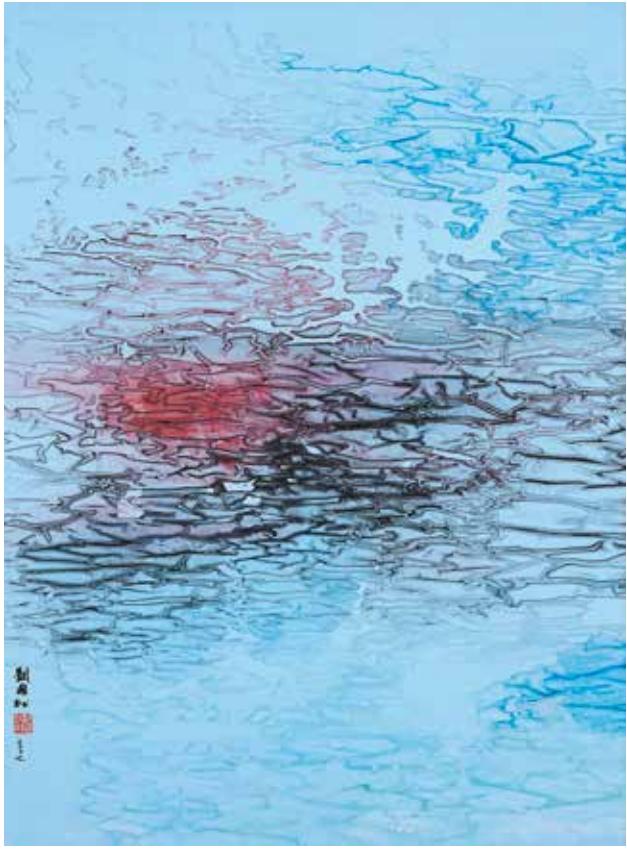


FIG 26 Liu Kuo-sung, *Water of Miluo River*, 2006  
Ink and color on paper, 35.83 x 26.38 in (91 x 67 cm)

strengthen, political influence increase, and Chinese culture will receive the world's attention and respect....We still have the confidence to believe that ink painting, and the Eastern painting system that had once experienced a magnificent history, will once again scale the summit of another mountain peak. Not only will it be equal to the [art of] the West, but it may even surpass it and take the lead."<sup>21</sup>

Liu Kuo-sung believes that even as in this new century European and American imperialist colonization and invasion become a matter of history, Chinese culture will continue to face challenges from the West. He once again reminds those "avant-garde" artists who blindly follow Western culture that "The West has long controlled international media. Have we not been taught to sing along with Christianity, and dance to the beat of Europe and the United States? Have we not been educated to believe that modern art equals Western art, and international painting equals European painting?"<sup>22</sup> Liu Kuo-sung pointed out the ways in which such Chinese artists have slavishly followed the West in order to attain a kind of "international approval" that may well come at the price of their own cultural tradition and national consciousness. On such a path, Chinese contemporary art may also lose touch with the roots of its tradition and thus be unable to build its own identity, finally ending up as an insignificant accessory in an international art scene dominated by the West.

For Liu Kuo-sung, his devoted support and promotion of modern ink painting directly relates to the historical duty and cultural mission of a Chinese intellectual, or *wenren*. In his 2005 essay "The Future of the Eastern Painting System," he stated: "[We] should look at the legacy of our nation's cultural traditions, and decide what to preserve and promote in an informed manner. On the other hand, we must also make informed choices about what to accept and

digest from Western and other modern cultural representations. This will enable us to create a new individual style that is at once Chinese, Taiwanese, and modern. The building of a new Eastern painting tradition is a responsibility that Chinese painters should not forsake, and a goal that we must industriously pursue."<sup>23</sup>

This kind of sensibility on the part of the Chinese intelligentsia is also subtly manifested in Liu's art. An example is his painting *Water of Miluo River* of 2006 (Fig. 26), which at first glance resembles works from his *Jiuzhaigou* series, using steeped ink and color techniques to create the effect of light reflected upon rippling water. However, in the center left of the image, a patch of reddish hue appears on the water's surface. This is a subtle allusion to the poet and scholar-official Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE), who sacrificed his life by jumping into the Miluo River as a symbolic act of patriotism. Regarded as a model for the Chinese intelligentsia, Qu Yuan remained loyal to his country even through turbulent times, and

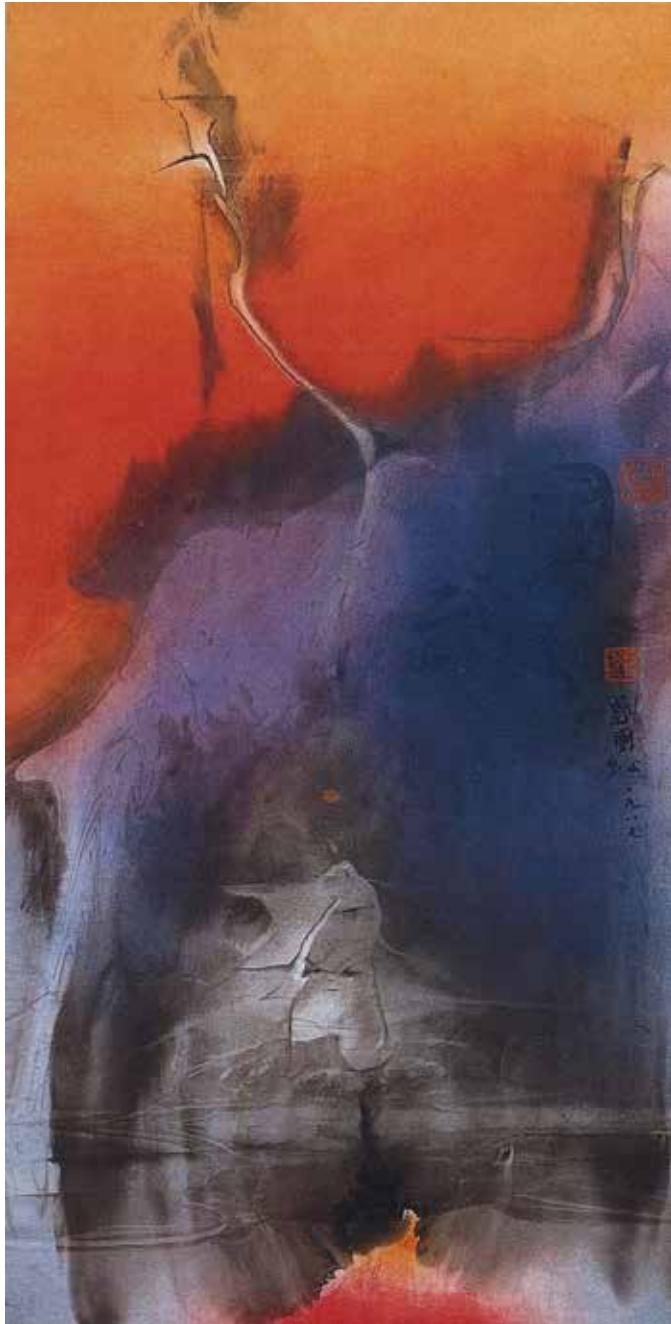


FIG 27 Liu Kuo-sung, *Soul of the Nation*, 1989  
Ink and color on paper, 53.15 x 27.17 in (135 x 69 cm)

gave up his life rather than sacrifice his principles. An earlier, compelling work on this same theme was created by Liu Kuo-sung in the late 1980s: *Soul of the Nation* (Fig. 27), which mourns this ancient patriot of ideals and integrity, while also expressing Liu's own love for his country. In this work, Liu also used the steeped ink technique to create unusual textural effects. To these he deftly applied ink and color, and created the faint impression of a bending figure draped in a long gown with wide sleeves, within a field of darkening washes. Below this figure there appears to be a winding river, and above him a fiery red sky, fractured and cracked. One hand is extended and points forcefully forwards: an image that is at once sorrowful and chillingly beautiful. Liu Kuo-sung seems to have projected [his own emotions] onto this figure, for next to his signature on the right hand side of the work, he inscribed the two characters *guohun* 國魂, or "nation's spirit."

In his famous poem "Encountering Sorrow" (*Li sao*), Qu Yuan wrote: "Long is the road and far is the journey/yet I will travel up and down and never cease my seeking."<sup>24</sup> Liu Kuo-sung is now in his seventies and has already established his historical significance in the field of Chinese art. Yet he continues to search for truth in his artistic path and to bring new ideas to his creative endeavors, always carrying his artistic achievement to new heights. At the same time, he has striven to go where others have not gone before: researching in depth, driving the development of modern ink painting, and working to ensure the survival of

traditional painting through its modern transition, so that a new Chinese tradition or Eastern painting system can be established. Looking at Liu Kuo-sung's artistic life in its entirety, it can be said that he has fully realized his historical duty and cultural mission as a modern Chinese literatus. Although he once accepted the influences of Western culture, he came to recognize the damage exerted by European and American imperialist and colonial ideologies early on. As a result, he returned to Chinese traditional art, tracing its source, and then made great efforts to develop and propagate the cultural spirit that exists innately in modern ink painting. His artistic creations and intellectual activities represent his unyielding and uncompromising spirit and his high ideals. One could say that he has established a new standard and model to which Chinese intellectual artists can aspire. Today, when China is experiencing rapid and drastic changes in its society and culture, Liu Kuo-sung's artistic achievements and ability to inspire and encourage a depth of thought and reflection in others, are of especial significance.

The complete English version of this article was previously published in *Yuzhou xinyin: Liu Guosong yi jiazi xueshu luntan* (Universe in the Mind: Proceedings of the Conference on Liu Guosong's 60 Years), ed. The Palace Museum (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2009), 253–296. The excerpt used here, in its original version, appears on pages 282–296.

\*Unless otherwise noted, all images of works by Liu Kuo-sung in this essay are courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.

## Notes

- 1 Liu Kuo-sung established the Ink Painting Society in Taiwan, and in 1970 organized the "Modern Chinese Ink Painting" exhibition. He later created the curriculum for the Modern Ink Painting Program for the Extramural Department of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1973. Graduates of this program later formed the Modern Chinese Ink Painting Association.
- 2 See Liu Kuo-sung, "Dangqian guohua de guannian wenti" [The Conceptual Problem of Contemporary Chinese Painting], in "88 Beijing guoji shuimo huazhan" lilun yantaohui zhuanji [Proceedings of the '88 Beijing International Ink and Wash Painting Exhibition], ed. Lin Pu (Beijing: Zhongguo hua yanjiuyuan, Zhongguo meishujia xiehui, 1988), 65–66.
- 3 Liu Kuo-sung, "Wode gaobai" [My Declaration], *Zhongyang ribao*, April 3, 1990.
- 4 Liu Kuo-sung, "Xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao!—congshi meishu jiaoyu sishi nian de yidian tiyu" [Seek First to Be Unique, and Then to be Excellent!] [Seek First to Be Unique, and Then to Be Excellent!: Some Thoughts on What I Have Learned from My 40 Years of Teaching Art], *Rong Bao Zhai* 1 (October 1999): 98.
- 5 See Shitao, *Huayu lu* [Recorded Remarks on Painting], ed. Yu Jianhua (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1959), 4, 7. These quotations from Shitao appear in several of Liu Kuo-sung's essays, including: "Tan huihua de jifa" [On Method in Painting] of 1965, "Tan huihua de jiqiao" [On Technique in Painting] of 1975, and "Xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao" [Seek First to Be Unique, Then to Be Excellent] of 1999. [For an English translation of Shitao's text, see *Enlightening Remarks on Painting by Shih T'ao*, trans. Richard E. Strassberg (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989)]
- 6 Huineng, *The Sutra of Huineng* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Buddhist Book Distributor Press, 1992), 69.
- 7 Liu Kuo-sung, "Xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao!—congshi meishu jiaoyu sishi nian de yidian tiyu" [Seek First to Be Unique, and Then to Be Excellent!: Some Thoughts on What I Have Learned from My 40 Years of Teaching Art], 100.
- 8 Huang Hetao, *Chan yu Zhongguo yishu jingshen de shanbian* [Chan and the Evolution of the Chinese Artistic Spirit] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), 352.
- 9 Zhou Shaohua, *Liu Guosong de yishu goucheng* [The Construction of Liu Kuo-sung's Art] (Wuhan: Hubei meishu chubanshe, 1985), 64–69.
- 10 These two artworks by Liu Kuo-sung were commissioned through the art dealer Hugh Moss. *Scenery of Hong Kong* was created for the Hong Kong collector K.S. Lo (Luo Guixiang), and *Source* was painted for then-Chase Manhattan Bank's Hong Kong headquarters.
- 11 Du Fu, *Feng xian Liu shaofu xin hua shanshui zhang ge* [Ode to the New Painting by Magistrate Liu of Fengxian County] in *Du Gongbu ji* [Anthology of Poems by Du Gongbu], vol.1 (Taipei: Xuesheng Shudian, 1967), 80. [Translation of the lines from Du Fu's poem quoted here by Valerie C. Doran].
- 12 Liu Kuo-sung, "Tan huihua de neirong yu xinshang" [On the Content and Appreciation of Painting], *Longyu wenwu yishu*, 8 (August 1991), 86–87.
- 13 Liu Kuo-sung, "Tan quixiang huihua" [On Abstract Painting], in *Wenxing* [Apollo] 6, no. 4 (August 1960): 24. Also published in *Bihui* 2, no. 3 (1 October 1960): 28.
- 14 Regarding the 1992 debate between Liu Kuo-sung and Lang Shaojun, see *Xiandai huihua ershi nian* [20 Years of Modern Ink Painting], ed. Lu Hong (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2002), 95–97. One year before, Wu Guanzhong and art historian Wan Qingli had a debate on Wu's notion of "brush and ink equals zero" during a dinner meeting in Hong Kong, Liu Kuo-sung was also there joining the debate. See Wan Qingli's recollection of this event, in "Guanyu 'bimo dengyu ling' de zhenglun—zhi Liu Xiaochun boshi de yi feng xin" [Regarding the Debate on "Brush and Ink is Zero": A Letter to Dr. Liu Xiaochun], in *Huajia yu huashi* [Painters and Painting History] (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 1997), 89–91.
- 15 Liu Kuo-sung, "Xian qiu yi, zai qiu hao!" [Seek First to Be Unique, Then to Be Excellent!] in *Di er jie guoji shuimo huazhan '92 Shenzhen lunwen ji* [Proceedings of the 2nd International Ink Exhibition, Shenzhen '92] (Shenzhen: Zhongguo hua yanjiuyuan, Shenzhen huayuan, 1992), 45.
- 16 Liu Kuo-sung, "Ershiyi shiji Xiandai shuimo huahui de zhongren" [The Responsibility of the Found Group] in *Xiandai shuimo huahui de yi zhounian chengli* [The First Anniversary of the Found Group] (Taichung: Found Group, 1996), 2.
- 17 Liu Kuo-sung, "Wo dui meishu jiaoyu gaige wenti de sikao yu shijian" [My Thoughts and Practices Regarding the Reform of Art Education], in *Ershi shiji Zhongguo meishu jiaoyu* [Art Education in the 20th Century China], ed. Pan Yaochang (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1999), 104–105.
- 18 Liu Kuo-sung, "Bentu yishi yu xiandai shuimohua—kaichuang guangming canlan de ershiyi shiji" [Native Consciousness and Modern Ink Painting: Creating a Bright 21st Century], in *Di er jie xiandai shuimo huazhan—Ershiyi shi de xin zhanwang* [The 2nd Modern Ink Painting Exhibition: New Prospects for the 21st Century] (Taipei, Taiwan Arts Education Institute, 1998), 11.
- 19 Ibid., 12.
- 20 Liu Kuo-sung, "Ershiyi shiji dongfang huihua de xin zhanwang" [New Prospects for Eastern Painting in the 21st Century], in *Ershi shiji shijue yishu xin zhanwang: Guoji xueshu yantao hui lunwen ji* [Proceedings of the International Symposium on New Prospects for Visual Art in the 21st Century], ed. Gu Bingxing (Taipei: Xingzheng yuan wenhua jianshe weiyuanhui [Council for Cultural Affairs, Executive Yuan], 1999), 579.
- 21 Liu Kuo-sung, "Ershiyi shiji dongfang huihua de xin zhanwang" [New Prospects for the Eastern Painting System in the 21st Century], in *Xinmo wufa* [Ink and Mind: Creation Without Limits], ed. Lin Lizhen (Kaoshiung: Kaoshiung Museum of Fine Arts, 2004), 22.
- 22 Ibid., 20.
- 23 Liu Kuo-sung, "Dongfang huaxi de weilai" [The Future of the Eastern Painting System] in *Guoji xiandai shuimo da zhan huace ji lunwen zhuanji* [Proceedings of the Symposium of the International Modern Ink Painting Exhibition] (Taoyuan: Vanung University et al., 2005), 4.
- 24 [Translation of these lines from Qu Yuan's poem by Valerie C. Doran.]

*Ode to Max Ernst, 1999*

Ink and color on paper

17.72 x 17.72 in (45 x 45 cm)

Cheng Huai House Collection, Taiwan



Thomas Lawton

## A FOREIGNER LOOKS AT CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PAINTING

1966

No people take more pride in their cultural heritage than do the Chinese. And with good reason: China's long, unbroken cultural history stands as one of the most remarkable of human achievements.

Having heard so much about China's cultural tradition, it is only natural that foreigners coming to Taiwan should look for some reflection of this same tradition in the work of contemporary Chinese artists.

Any foreigner who is interested in seeing the work of young Chinese artists might begin by attending some of the painting exhibitions in Taipei. There are plenty to choose from—an average of two or three every week.

The City Hall, Provincial Museum, and the Fine Arts Hall in the National Historical Museum are fairly convenient, and all have regular exhibitions. Many smaller exhibitions are held in other galleries throughout the city.

After becoming familiar with the work of the better known artists, one gradually becomes aware of several different trends in contemporary Chinese painting.

One group is composed of artists who paint *kuo-hua*, or national painting. Foreigners are particularly fond of this school of painting, and many of the more famous artists have a devoted coterie of foreign students.

These artists adhere closely to the time-honored rules of traditional Chinese painting. Their materials and subject matter are familiar, and, with few exceptions, their painting technique is excellent. It would be difficult to find fault with their work on any of these grounds.

But among the innumerable practitioners of *kuo-hua*, a patient exhibition goer more often than not will look in vain for anything more than technical dexterity. Once an artist develops some skill, it is important that he have something worthwhile to say.

Chinese critics are aware of this, and have always been quick to praise those artists who are able to penetrate to the essence of reality. Many contemporary *kuo-hua* artists, however, are content to repeat what has already been said many times over by earlier artists.

Another group of contemporary artists is composed of those Chinese who are influenced by recent developments in Western painting. These artists apparently have completely rejected Chinese tradition.

If their work were exhibited in Rome, Paris, London, or New York, there would be no way to identify the artists as being Chinese.

Most of these artists have had little direct contact with Western painting of the first quality. Nonetheless, an exhibition goer will again be surprised at the high level of technical proficiency. He will also have the uneasy feeling that he has seen most of these paintings before.

A glance at any standard history of Western art will reassure him that he has. Nearly every 'ism' that has enjoyed a vogue in Western art during the past sixty years is represented in an average exhibition.

Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, and Abstract Expressionism all seem to have their Chinese counterparts in Taiwan. All too rarely does one find something fresh and new, some indication that these artists have succeeded in infusing the artistic cliches with something of themselves.

Finally, there is a third group of artists whose work cannot be categorized so easily. While there are undeniable traces of *kuo-hua* in their paintings, there are other elements that can only be explained by some knowledge of Western art.

These artists stand, as it were, astride two traditions, and are searching for something fresh and viable. Equally important, they seem concerned with finding an artistic vocabulary which will enable them to make their statements in terms of their own tradition.

These artists occupy a somewhat precarious position in the artistic community, for their work doesn't satisfy any of the already established traditions.

*Kuo-hua* artists look askance at their paintings as being a vulgarization of Chinese culture. Practitioners of Western art, on the other hand, scorn them for their unwillingness to throw off all ties with their Chinese tradition.

The contemporary separation of Chinese artists practicing *kuo-hua* and Western painting seems artificial. It would be ridiculous to deny that Western culture has had an impact in Taiwan. It seems equally implausible to believe that Chinese culture will remain the same after having been subjected to such a barrage of Western influence.

It seems more reasonable to assume that something new—something which is neither completely traditional nor completely Western—will result from this meeting of cultures. It might well be, too, that the work of those artists in the last group marks the beginnings of such a new direction.

One of the best known young artists in this last group is Liu Kuo-sung. Liu's most recent paintings are executed on a rather coarse grade of *mien* [*mian*, cotton] paper. To achieve some of his most interesting visual effects, he relies heavily upon the rugged quality of this paper.

At various stages during the progress of a painting, he tears slender strips off the top layer of paper. By such a simple technique the artist adds irregular light accents which meander through darker areas.

Though Liu does introduce color in his paintings from time to time, it usually is not particularly important. Essentially he is working in black and white.

While his paintings are completely abstract, some viewers occasionally find traces of landscape elements in them. In reply to such comments, the artist only nods noncommittally. Such matters obviously are of little importance to him.

He seems much more concerned with capturing a total image: an image that is revealed instantly. Bold strokes of ink move drunkenly over the surface of the rough paper. Outlines are rugged and bold.

Forms blur occasionally, and encountering gray washes, merge and emerge as if engaged in some frenetic dialogue with the coarse, textured paper.

Liu is by nature garrulous. Meeting him, one immediately is aware that he not only enjoys talking, but has quite definite ideas about painting which he will express whether or not anyone agrees with him.

He speaks with force and exuberance, and it is this same forthright quality in his work that most impresses the viewer.

Liu frankly admits that when he begins to work, he has only a vague idea in mind. Moreover, he feels that an artist should not limit himself by being bound to a definite model or subject.

In a recent article, he criticized Picasso for his paraphrases of Velasquez's paintings. Though one may disagree with Liu's reasoning, one must applaud the vigor of his argument.

Apparently Liu is infatuated with his materials. This is all the more interesting since he has set himself the task of working with an extremely limited artistic vocabulary.

Yet he seems to thrive under his self-imposed discipline and still is able to attain an impressive variation in his work. Nonetheless, one wonders if, in the future, he will continue to find sufficient means of expression while working so laconically.

It is tempting to speculate what Liu might do if he were to begin experimenting with color. While he has been reluctant to use much color so far, it might possibly lend his paintings an even greater strength.

In any case, one can recognize in the work of Liu Kuo-sung, and in the work of artists like him, the beginnings of something that might possibly result in a new and viable contribution to Chinese culture.

This article was previously published in the exhibition catalogue LIU KUO-SUNG (*Liu Guosong huajì*) (Taipei: National Historical Museum, 1966), 9-12.

<sup>1</sup> [This term is rendered also as *guohua*, "national painting," and "Chinese painting" elsewhere in this *Reader*.]

# DANCES IN THE EMPYREAN AND EYE-EXCURSIONS THROUGH THE EIGHT LIMITS: LIU GUOSONG'S TENSIONAL DIALOGS WITH THE MODERNISTS IN THE WEST

2002/2012

## 1. Antagonistic Symbioses and Double / Multiple Perception

The present essay proposes to examine the art of Liu Guosong in the midst of traditional Chinese culture's confrontation and negotiation with the West, with special emphasis on Chinese calligraphy as an entrance into his complex aesthetic encounter with Western modernists.

Many modern Chinese artists have confessed that their works were ignited by the theories and practices of modern Western painters. But, modern Chinese paintings, like modern Chinese culture in general, emerged in the wake of the Opium War, and the following colonizing activities of the Western powers caused a series of inevitable conflicts between native sensibility and the intruding ideologies. From the very beginning, modern Chinese culture has intertwined multifaceted dialectical metamorphoses from various aggressions of the West. The tensional dialogues in modern Chinese paintings represent various dimensions of confrontation, negotiation, and modification within this dialectical process. We witness various kinds of convergences and divergences between traditional Chinese aesthetic horizons and Western modern orientations at work, engendering new syntheses as well as intercultural subversions and interactive inventions or reinventions.

In the case of Liu Guosong, his negotiations with the works of Abstract Expressionists are particularly acute and complex. However, we must, first, have this understanding: even in works that bear a clear stamp of influence from the West, we cannot assume that what is true of the source model must also be true of its transplanted product. There are always native elements that will condition the process of transplantation. We must further ask this question: under what cultural climate or political and social conditions did the Chinese artists discover perspectives and strategies compatible with those of the Western modernists? Or, to slightly modify the question: what did they get from Western modernism that filled their need to express the specific cultural and psychological conditions in which they found themselves? To answer this first set of questions is to identify the unique situatedness of both the Western and the Chinese cultural phenomena, so as to map out the exact ways in which the two trajectories converged and diverged, and in response to which historical exigencies. The unfolding of this situatedness will allow us to identify other significant issues. We must now ask: what kind of historical necessity prompted the Chinese artists to reject traditional canons and accept a certain alien ideology? In the course of the acceptance, what native ideological aesthetic models were resorted to (albeit unconsciously) for support and justification? What kind of modification was being made in the midst of ideological tensions in order to localize a given alien model for native acceptance? What intellectual and aesthetic obsessions or memories in the native world

view, including a theory of history and mental habits (again, albeit open denunciation of them) had conditioned their rejection of certain dimensions of an imported theory or strategy?

Now, a few words about the abstract art of Chinese calligraphy (Fig. 1). Chinese calligraphy has been considered an independent art form since ancient times, by the sheer fact that it embodies the movement of life's energy, both as energy-constructs and energy-discharges, through the dance of the line.<sup>1</sup> The practice of Chinese calligraphy has often been compared to walking or running. The moment before the execution of the brush is like holding the breath before starting to run. Executing the brush is then like discharging the breath, unfurling or rushing forward. Chinese calligraphy is also compared to running water: it turns with mountains and rocks, and shapes itself according to the object it encounters; we see lines or sinews whirling and twirling when the water hits a rock or a series of rocks. Sometimes, one

unhesitating, quickly executed stroke—as can be understood, fueled with the fluidity of the Chinese ink and the fast absorbency of the rice paper; almost all strokes have to be executed spontaneously and without hesitation—such a stroke can sometimes skip over part of the paper before ending in another part, leaving a middle portion without any ink—and this is called *feibai* or “flying-white.” However, what is broken is only the brushstroke, the material dimension, so to speak: the energy that drives the stroke has never been disrupted, for the energy runs right through it. These calligraphic strokes are the foundation of bamboo and orchid paintings.

In a larger sense, all Chinese paintings can be said to have derived their strength from the brushstrokes and the ink-feelings of Chinese calligraphy. This is particularly true in the works of Chan or Zen painters like Yujian (fl. c. 1250), Liang Kai (12th century), Shi Ke (10th century), and later



**FIG. 1** Yang Caoxian (1838–1944)  
*Calligraphy in Cursive Script*, date unknown.  
Ink on paper,  
21.25 × 55.5 in (54 × 141 cm)  
Collection of Prof. and Mrs. Wai-lim Yip

painters like Shitao (1642–1707) and Zhu Da (Bada Shanren, 1626–1705), all of whom transcend the external form by grasping the fastness and slowness, the taking-in and throwing-out, the attacking and splashing, the rising and frisking of the line, the brimming of spiritual vibration, executed, as it were, in a manner that is almost mindlessly unhesitating. Witness the following descriptions: here a drop of crystal dew hanging on the tip of a needle; there, the rumbling of thunder down a shower of stone. Now, flocks of queen-swans floating on their wings or a sinuous serpent wriggling in fright. Such images highlight precisely the movement of energy within the line. Step outside and open your eyes: no river is straight. Each one twists and turns, twists and turns and shapes itself according to the objects it encounters, curving into a beautiful form, twisting into a unique dance. The surf pounds upon the rocks, *curling* up rolls and rolls of spindrift. Branches long and short—some hang into hooks, some wind around rocks with embraces. From the high sky in Big Island in Hawaii, we see slowly flowing lava, like a brush held by an invisible hand driving a line of molten red flames, now rising up, now splashing down, breaking mountains, making mountains, breaking valleys, making valleys. It is not an accident that the Abstract Expressionists, following the suggestions of Van Gogh (1853–1890) and Kandinsky (1866–1944) that colors and lines are self-expressive, and forms of spiritual vibration, have fallen in love with Chinese calligraphic strokes. This rhythmic vital energy movement (*qi*, or *qiyun shengdong*) has been the staple of all Chinese arts and literature and the mainstay of Chinese aesthetics.

It is not an accident that the British art critic Roger Fry, after his visits to exhibitions of Chinese bronzes and paintings, should notice and highly praise the uniqueness of the Chinese brush-stroke.<sup>2</sup> In his essay, "Post-Impressionism," published in 1911, written in reference to a large exhibition that he had organized in London the year before, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" (among them, Van Gogh and Cézanne [1839–1906]), Fry writes:

Particular rhythms of line and particular harmonies of color have their spiritual correspondences and tend to arouse one set of feelings, now another .... Rhythm ... is the fundamental and vital quality of painting, as of all the arts.<sup>3</sup>

This discovery represents an important turn in Western art's departure from mimetic theory. The claim in the words, "Particular rhythms of line and particular harmonies of color have their spiritual correspondences," is derived from Van Gogh and Kandinsky. With these words, Fry touched upon the convergence between ancient Chinese and modern Western aesthetics. This is intriguing. Here, we are not saying that he had a studied understanding of the entire gamut of calligraphy, from bronzes and seals to calligraphy proper; but it is of particular interest to us that the new aesthetic turn to shake away the likeness of external form to achieve spiritual vibration has long been the mainstream in traditional Chinese art. While at root Fry's claims might have different tangents from the Chinese dictum of *qiyunshengdong* ("breath" / "rhythm" / "vital" / "alive"), they provide a dialogic opportunity; both aim at spiritual vibration beyond external form.

This critical turn can be seen as the rise of the importance of theories on Energy or Kraft in art. We can begin with Herder's critique of Lessing's defining the arts by way of mediumistic differences, namely that poetry, using language, can only present actions (events), and is thus a time art; while painting, using colors

and lines, can only present static objects, and is thus a space art. Because painting is an art that arranges objects in space, it cannot present objects in succession (event/s); it can only choose a point of time (one moment) to suggest the before and after of an event. Because poetry communicates with language signs, it also deals with objects, but it does so only by suggestion through actions. In my essay, "Anders-streben: Conception of Media and Intermedia," using examples from both Chinese poetry and paintings that often possess both mediumistic characteristics, I challenge Lessing's distinction, and his use of epic (or narrative poetry) as his primary model.<sup>4</sup> But let us look at Herder's response to Lessing:

The concept of succession is only half the idea of action. Action is succession through Kraft. I think of an entity which operates through temporal succession. I think of transformations which through Kraft of one substance are consequent upon another: this is how action occurs. And I bet that if action is the object of poetry, this object can never be determined from the dry concept to succession: Kraft is the center of the sphere...

In and around 1910, Ezra Pound criticizes the mimetic and advances the dynamic:

The spirit of the arts is dynamic (1910, *Spirit of Romance*, 234) Rodin's belief that energy is beauty holds thus far, namely, that all our ideas of beauty of line are in some way connected with our idea of swiftness or easy power of motion (1910, *Translations*, 23.)

In every art I can think of we are damned and clogged by the mimetic: dynamic acting is nearly forgotten. (*New Age*, X.16, Feb. 15, 1912, p.370.)

... the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying (1912, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 49.)

Poetry is a centaur. The thinking, word-arranging (Yip: in painting, the deployment of color and line), clarifying faculty must move and leap with the energizing, sentient, musical faculties (1912, *Literary Essays*, 52.)

This shift has, of course, given rise to the Projective Verse of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley.

Let us now look at Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (Fig. 2). The entire vertigo and *tremolo* feeling was achieved through the whirling and twirling of colors and lines; it did not depend on the likeness of the external forms. On November 16, 1888, in a letter to his youngest sister Wilhelmina, Van Gogh wrote:

I don't know whether you can understand that one may make a poem by arranging colors alone: in the same way that you can say comforting things in music. In a similar manner, the bizarre lines, purposely selected and multiplied, meandering all through the picture, may fail to give the garden a vulgar resemblance, but may present it to our minds as seen in a dream, depicting its character, and, at the same time, stranger than it is in reality.

Colors or lines by themselves are adequate to express the *tremolo* of feeling. It was these expressive colors and lines that gave rise to Fauvism, such as Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre* and to Expressionism, such as Edvard Munch's (1865–1944) *Skrik*.

Following Van Gogh, both Cézanne in 1904 and Kandinsky in 1911 and 1912 went so far as to say that lines and colors can emit a “corresponding spiritual vibration,” an “inner resonance,” leading later to the view of pure expression through the linear medium, and lines alone, such as the Abstract Expressionists, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Mark Tobey, etc. many of whom have had inspiration from, or directly studied or practiced, Chinese and/or Japanese calligraphy.

Here, let us consider the works of Mark Tobey (1890–1976) who had studied Chinese calligraphy in Shanghai and Japan, and whose “white writing” paintings were once models for Jackson Pollock (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup> Looking back, Tobey reminisces: “It’s been said I was searching for new techniques. Nothing of the sort. I was really enjoying myself, learning to do things that interested me. When I returned to England I was disturbed. I began to daub on a canvas and I was puzzled by the result. A few streaks of white, some blue streaks. Looked like a distorted nest. It bothered me. What I had learned in the Orient had affected me more than I realized. This was a new approach. I couldn’t shake it off. So I had to absorb it before it consumed me. In a short time white writing emerged. I had a totally new conception of painting. The Orient has been the greatest influence of my life.” This paragraph must be read together with the following: “Some critics have accused me of being an Orientalist and of using Oriental models. But this is not so, for I knew when in Japan and China—as I struggled with their sumi ink and brush in an attempt to understand their calligraphy—that I would never but be the Occidental that I am. But it was here that I got what I call the calligraphic impulse to carry my work on into



**FIG. 2** Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *The Starry Night*, Saint Rémy, June 1889  
Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/4 in. (73.7 x 92.1 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest.  
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some new dimensions .... With this method I found I could paint the frenetic rhythms of the modern city, the interweaving of lights and the streams of people who are entangled in the meshes of this net.”<sup>6</sup>

We know from Liu Guosong’s apprenticeship works that he, “using oil, had imitated the works of most of the important Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, Cubist, Expressionist,



**FIG. 3** Mark Tobey (1890–1976), *The Way*, 1944  
Tempera on cardboard, 14 x 22 1/8 in. (35.6 x 56.2 cm).  
The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection, Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, 2006 (2006.32.61).  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY USA. Image copyright © The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY  
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**FIG. 4** Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *Untitled*, c. 1950  
Black ink, overall: 20½ × 6½ in. (52 × 17.7 cm). Ailsa Mellon  
Bruce Fund, National Gallery of Art, Washington 1985.62.2  
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(ARS), New York

and Abstract Expressionist painters. Most cogent to our topic are the works of the latter. Not only has Liu confessed that he was inspired by Franz Kline's paintings consisting only of large black brushstrokes of calligraphic impulse, he had also imitated one of Pollock's large paintings constructed by pouring, dripping-swinging, or let-flowing colors onto a huge canvas, allowing the resultant lines to interweave into a netlike vortex of energy (Figs. 4 and 5). Abstract Expressionist painting is also called Action Painting. The description of Pollock at work by Allan Kaprow, the founder of Happenings, is the most vivid. Let me summarize. It is as if the painter is performing a ritual. In front of an awe-inspiring, huge white canvas, every high energy-driven action taken with the paint by an artist driven along by an existential extremity, like a lone fighter in a huge arena, is itself a proclamation of an existential crisis. It is as if every brush, every dot, every line is the affirmation of his self.

In a sense, the painting is nothing but the traces left behind from violent actions, and actions and traces, like dancer and dance, have become one. Here, since action itself is part of the artistic execution, the action itself is art. And thus, Kaprow invented Happenings.<sup>7</sup>

This description bears much resemblance to our discourse on Chinese calligraphy and the stories that go with it. In fact, in one of the lectures given by Liu Guosong, he offered, as an illustration of Pollock's actions, this story: A drunken monk calligrapher, after chewing on a piece of sugarcane, grabbed some of the remains, dipped the whole in ink without premeditation, and blasted it onto the rice paper, all energy and force intact. In both cases, there is improvised or accidental spontaneity, a moment, primitive and primary, unspoiled and unborkered by thought. By this story, we can see that Liu Guosong was very much in tune with the development of this line of new aesthetic turn, although he might not have fully understood the complexity inherent within it. In his 1961 essay "Painting's Narrow Valley: a discussion prompted by the 15th Provincial Fine Arts Exhibition," Liu offered, in a rather positive tone, his historical overview of the development of modern painting in the West:

After the two World Wars in Europe, there was a pervasive sense of disorder and distress in matters of culture and beliefs. Modern (Western) paintings engaged in a frantic revolt against academic, traditional artistic styles in search of a new art, a new idea, a new form completely divorced from tradition. Although their search in metaphysics did not lead them successfully to the "real," or the "substantiative," they found there a certain conceptual depth. Likewise, although they did not discover a new form completely divorced from tradition, they found a new feeling for form. These two facts point to their relentless quest for the destruction of Nature's original forms in order to establish something absolute, something subjective and abstract, toward a unified world of new belief, new culture. Their search went beyond Africa and reached the Orient. There, they found Chinese calligraphy to be more attuned to their desires. As a result, abstract painting was born. It is inevitable that the West and the East will interflow. The new cultural belief will come out of this confluence.<sup>8</sup>



**FIG. 5** Franz Kline (1910–1962), *Untitled*, 1961  
Oil on canvas, 81½ × 149¾ × 1½ in. (205.4 × 381 × 3.8 cm).  
Bequest of Andrea Bolt, 2012 (2012.448.8)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY USA.  
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Image source: Art Resource, NY  
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New York



FIG. 6 Franz Kline (1910–1962)

*Self-Portrait*, c.1940

Brush and black ink over graphite on woven paper,  
sheet: 9 7/8 × 8 7/8 in. (25.08 × 22.54 cm)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington,  
Gift of Rufus Zogbaum and Reina Schratter 2016.60.30  
© 2021 The Franz Kline Estate / Artists Rights Society  
(ARS), New York

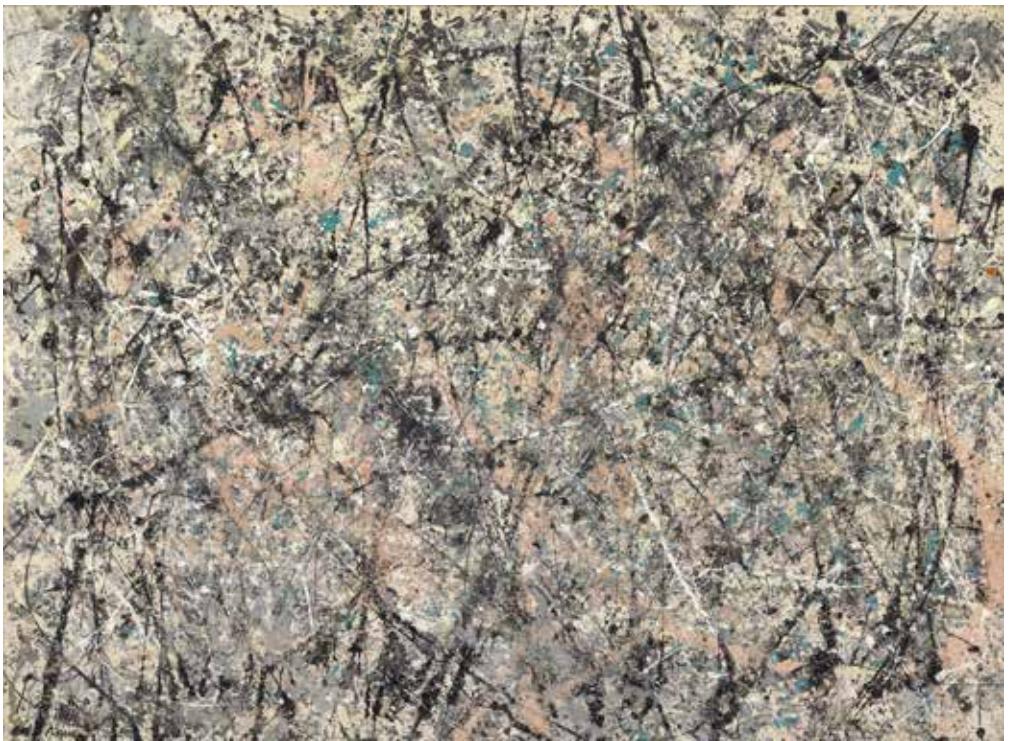


FIG. 7 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950

Oil, enamel and aluminum on canvas,  
overall: 87 × 118 in (221 × 299.7 cm), framed: 88 × 119 × 1 1/2 in (223.5 × 302.3 × 3.8 cm)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. National Gallery of Art, Washington 1976.37.1  
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As we have intimated in the beginning, the question of influence, in the context of intercultural encounter, is much more complex and complicated than our tendency to sort out the pieces by reasoning or by appealing to a momentary feeling. The unconscious workings from within a reservoir of cultural and aesthetic memories at the instant of the painter's execution, easily outstrips his confessional telling. We suggest to juxtapose the works of Pollock and Kline against an example of Liu Guosong's, *The Dance of Spiritual Rhythm* (Figs. 6, 7, 8).

Admittedly, Liu's painting was spurred by Pollock and Kline, but neither of the latter would be able to achieve the horizon evoked by Liu's painting. One quick answer to why this is so, is that neither truly studied the art of Chinese calligraphy, or immersed himself in the practice of the art long enough to be fully aware of the hard and soft of the brush and the thick and thin of the ink. Yet it is precisely these features that helped generate thousands of different expressions or fashions of emotive content as the calligraphic strokes were being played out on the fast-absorbing rice paper. There are, of course, also mediumistic differences between ink and oil, with each yielding very different textures. There is no suggestion here that such artists should have thrown themselves entirely into mastering Chinese calligraphy. Mark Tobey's account given above betrays the fact that the tangents of Chinese and Western paintings point to different representations. We simply should not privilege one medium over the other. Aside from the art of guiding the ink into rhythmic dances, there are important differences in the mindset, in what I would like to call an all-embracing bosom or *xionghuai* 胸懷 (a sphere of consciousness that embraces "a million things, a million changes"). Liu's work, at first glance, is just another Abstract Expressionist painting done



FIG. 8 Liu Guo-sung, *Dance of Spiritual Rhythm*, 1964  
Ink and color on paper, 34.72 × 23.23 in (88.2 × 59 cm)

in Chinese ink, or at least an echo of Pollock and Kline; but it can easily also be an example of misty *yun/shan/yan/shui* (cloud/mountain/mist/water) landscape developed from the Daoist-inspired painter-poet Su Dongpo (1037–1101) of the Southern Song dynasty.

## 2. *Yunshan yanshui* and the edge-dissolving aesthetic strategy

We need to retrace the visual development of this feeling of *xionghuai* to the Daoists' advocacy of noninterference with, and non-intrusiveness into, Nature's flow, the aesthetic dimension of which helps the Chinese modernists retain their Chineseness in their negotiation with the abstract paintings of the West.

The Daoist project began, originally, not as treatises on aesthetics as such, but as a critique of the framing functions of language in the feudalistic Zhou dynasty's (1046–256 BCE) construction of Names or Norms (the Naming System) to legitimize and consolidate its power hierarchies. The Daoists felt that under the Naming System (such as calling the Emperor the "Son of Heaven," investing lords, fathers, and husbands with unchallenged power over subjects, sons, and wives, etc.) was in fact a political system created to sustain the privileges of those wielding power over others: as a result, the birthrights of humans as natural beings were restricted and distorted. Laozi began his project with full awareness of this restrictive and—distortive—activity of names and words and their power-wielding violence. It was this awareness that opened up the Daoist reconsiderations of language and power, both a political and an aesthetic project. Politically, they intended to implode the so-called "Kingly Dao," the "Heavenly Dao," and the Naming System so that memories of the repressed, exiled, and alienated natural self could be fully reawakened, leading to recovery of full humanity with the understanding that humans, as only one form of being among a million others, have no prerogative to classify the cosmic scheme. From the very beginning, the Daoists believed that the totalizing compositional activity of all phenomena, changing and ongoing, is beyond human comprehension. All conscious efforts to generalize, formulate, classify, and order them will result in some form of restriction and reduction. We impose these conceptions, which, by definition, must be partial and incomplete, upon total phenomena at the peril of losing touch with the concrete appeal of the totality of things. Meanwhile, the real world, quite without human supervision and explanation, is totally alive, self-generating, self-conditioning, self-transforming, and self-complete. Each form of being has its own nature, its own place; how can we take this as subject (principal) and that as object (subordinate)? How can we impose "our" viewpoint upon others as the right viewpoint, the only right viewpoint? "Not to discriminate this and that as opposites is the essence of Dao." Thus, only when the subject retreats from its dominating position—taking "I" from the primary position for aesthetic contemplation—can we allow the Free Flow of Nature to reassume itself. It is no accident that most Chinese landscape paintings use aerial, mid-air, and ground perspectives simultaneously and freely. Front mountains, back mountains, front villages, back villages, bays in front of mountains, and bays behind mountains are seen simultaneously. This is because the viewers are not locked into only one viewing position. Not to be locked into only one viewing position is the rhetorical parallel of not to be locked into the framing function of the Naming system. The concept of Western perspective is a result of chosen location

and chosen direction according to the viewer/painter's subjective interests, thus, a restrictive and limiting viewing. Chinese painters believe that to know the personality of the mountains, you have to travel months on end into the mountains, viewing them from near, from far, from the heights, from below, with clouds, without clouds, in spring, in autumn ... so as to accumulate enough visual knowledge of the mountains. Thus, in their works, they change positions constantly to undo viewing restrictions, allowing several variations of knowledge to converge upon their consciousness. Take Fan Kuan's (act. ca. 990–1030) *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* as an example (Fig. 9).

In this large vertical hanging scroll, several travelers, appearing very small, emerge from the lower right corner with large trees behind them. This means that we are viewing them from a distance. But behind the trees, a very distant mountain now springs before our eyes, huge, majestic and immediate, as if pressing upon our eyes. We are given to view the scene simultaneously from two distances and from several altitudes. Between the foreground and the background lies a diffusing mist, creating an emptiness out of its whiteness, an emptiness which has physicality in the real world. It is this whiteness, this void, which helps to dissolve our otherwise locked-in sense of distances, engendering a free-floating registering activity. One may also notice that the speck of human existence, the travelers in the lower right corner, instead of dominating Nature, merges with, and has become part of the Total Composition of all phenomena.

This strategy is paramount in Chinese landscape paintings. Witness, for example, this frame from a work which seems to suggest a perspective of the Western kind, but this is only a small detail of the next frame, which occupies no dominating position (Fig. 10a).

In this full picture, we are drawn into the midst of a million things (views) at work in Nature in its immensity (Fig. 10b). We are invited to move freely across layer and layer of visual richness, now high, now low, now far, now near, to meditate. Please remember this feeling of moving freely toward limitless space, which is closely related to the aesthetic-cultural staples of *jingjie* 境界 (a world such as that evoked in Chinese poetry and painting), *fengfan* 風範 (a mode or way of life that aspires to the free flow of Nature), and *xionghuai* 胸懷 (a bosom or sphere of consciousness that embraces "a million things, a million changes" in the free-floating space that allows one not to be locked into one hegemonic system). Please also understand that these terms are predicated on the condition of easy activity achieved only after deframing and not being locked into any concept. The Daoist idea of "let Nature be" in its fullest expression, free of human intervention, is too obvious to need comment here. The use of emptiness as a negative space, a silent, meditative condition through which Nature emerges in its full brilliant innocence, is continually employed in Chinese landscape painting in general, and in Daoist/Chan (Zen) Buddhist paintings in particular. The Chinese artist stresses the emptiness, the void, as the indispensable cooperator of the solid in the paintings. The negative space, such as the emptiness in a painting and the condition of silence with meanings trembling at the edge of words in a poem, is made into something vastly more significant and positive, and indeed, has become a horizon toward which Chinese aesthetic attention is constantly directed.

There are two directions in which the use of emptiness was developed in China, and both of these played an important role in the development of Japanese *suiboku* (monochrome ink) versions

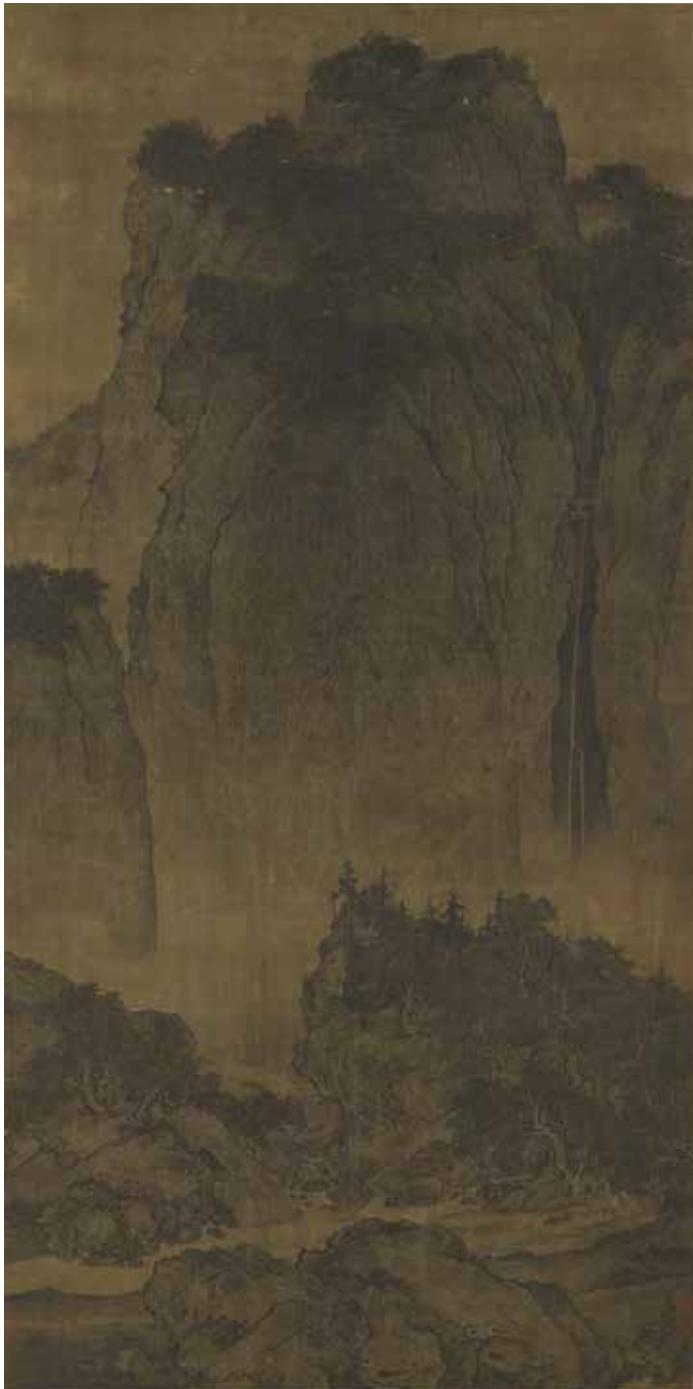


FIG. 9 Fan Kuan (act. ca. 990–1030)

*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, early 11th c.

Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 81.2 × 40.7 in (206.3 × 103.3 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei



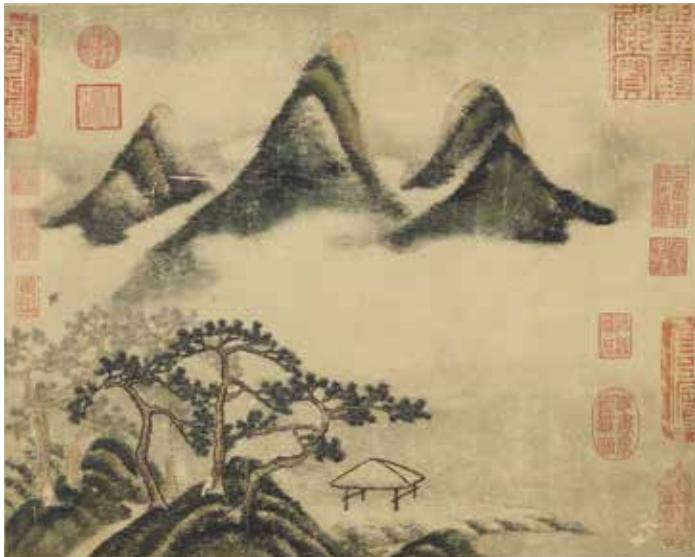
FIG. 10A Dai Jin (1388–1462), *Returning Late from a Spring Outing* (detail)



FIG. 10B Dai Jin (1388–1462)

*Returning Late from a Spring Outing* (full painting)

Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 66.1 × 32.7 in. (167.9 × 83.1 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei



**FIG. 11 Attributed to Mi Fu (1051–1107), *Spring Mountains and Auspicious Pines***  
Ink and colors on paper, 13.8 × 17.36 in. (35 × 44.1 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei

of Chinese paintings in the Muromachi Period. One direction is represented by the works of Su Dongpo's coterie, Mi Fu (1012–1107) and his son Mi Youren (1082–1165) (often referred to as the *yunshan*, or “cloudy mountain” style of the Mi’s). In Mi Fu’s *Spring Mountains and Auspicious Pines* (Fig. 11), between the pines and pavilion in the foreground and the mountains in the background, there lies a huge stretch of rolling clouds that serves to diffuse the distances, allowing mountains in the far distances, seen from an aerial perspective, to appear closer. In Mi Youren’s long handscrolls, *Rare Views of Xiao-Xiang* and *Cloudy Mountains*, the clouds/mists, occupying more than half the total space in the paintings, seem to surge into endlessness. This cloud-mist is concrete and yet empty, concrete as an object, a thing in Nature, empty, one feels, in the “field” of space within the painting, or empty as a “distant haze,” a phrase Su Dongpo often used in his poetry and writings on art to describe this condition which he also linked to Wang Wei’s line “Mountain color, between seen and unseen” (a phrase adopted frequently by later painters and theorists); and to this sense of emptiness, a subversive emptiness, so to speak, that erases the lines and edges that define chosen viewing position and chosen viewing direction such as the use of perspective in Western paintings. Without the restrictiveness of framing, we are at once near and distant, distant yet near, high and low, low yet high, meditating and listening, as if in a trance, silence, stillness and the empty-yet-full condition of the totalizing Composition of a Million Things at work. The second type of use of emptiness is represented by the paintings of Ma Yuan (c. 1150–1225) and Xia Gui (1190–1230), referred to as the Ma-Xia School. Ma Yuan’s paintings are famous for Ma’s way of anchoring the scene (solid) on one corner (called Ma-Corner in art history), leading through mountain lines or tree shadows between the seen and unseen and into the mysterious Void and Stillness of the immensity of Nature. (Fig. 12).

In subsequent paintings on the theme of “Eight Views of Xiao Xiang” by Daoist-inspired Chan (Zen) Buddhist painters like Muqi (ca. 1200–1280) and Yujian (fl. mid-13th c.), an expanding cloud-mist/mist-vagueness now occupies more than three-fourths of the total painting space, making emptiness the primary object of our aesthetic contemplation, as in Muqi’s iconic painting, *Distant Shore: Returning Sails*.



**FIG. 12 Ma Yuan (act. 1190–1224), *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring***  
Album leaf, ink and colors on silk, 10.8 × 17 in (27.4 × 43.1 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei

It is not what one usually calls landscape painting. Only the shadows/shades of a few trees appear in one corner. The rest is endlessly stretching emptiness (visually speaking, negative space). Distant mountains slowly dissolve into the mist, or shall I say, they are being dissolved by the mist. There, one feels energy riding through it. We seem to see, or shall I say, feel, two sails, seen, unseen, there, not there. There is wind, seen or, more correctly, felt, in the dusk as it were, rolling the mist into the infinite *wu* 無 [“nothingness”] or the condition of the total composition of things before naming.

Likewise in the painting *Mountain Village in the Clearing Mist* by Yujian, we see the same kind of quick, unhesitating, spontaneous, expressionistic brushstrokes capturing the feeling of an object or moment in abbreviated luminous details. The fullness of stillness and emptiness is highlighted by a few solid, free-reeling strokes, all inspired by Daoist ideas of “less is more,” “great music has no sound,” “act not and nothing is not acted upon,” and similarly captivated almost all the Muromachi *suiboku* painters, many of whom were Zen Buddhists themselves, from Kamakura and from Kyoto (Fig. 16). Artists like Sesshū (1420–1505), Mokuan (d. 1492), and Sesson Shūkei (1504–c. 1589), continuously developed Yujian’s unhesitating, spontaneous, expressionistic brushstrokes as well as the empty-yet-full feeling of Muqi and Yujian (Fig. 13).<sup>9</sup>

The *empty-yet-full* condition, in terms of artistic execution, is a challenge of an unusual nature. When the Chinese painters made emptiness/mist-vagueness as their primary object for aesthetic contemplation, and when they wanted to scale up to the empyrean, roaming with their eyes among infinite things and beings; and when they asked themselves to achieve oneness in their sense and execution, intuition and expression, aside from making sure the energy would fill and go through the lines, they also ensured that the dancing of black ink must negotiate with the whiteness of the rice paper or silk, making the emptiness the energy that manifests in motion in the cosmos. In Yujian’s *Mountain Village in Clearing Mist* discussed above, even without the accompanying inscribed poem, any viewer can feel the presence of rain and mist in the whiteness that seems to be overflowing the mountain town: this is because this is a sort of negative construction, the strategy of using the (black) inked brushwork to bring out and elevate the (white)



FIG. 13 Sesshū Toyo (1420–1506?), *Haboku sansui* (detail)  
Muromachi period, dated 1495 (Meio 4)  
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 58.5 × 12.87 in (148.6 × 32.7 cm)  
Collection of Tokyo National Museum A-282  
Source: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/>)

uninked paper or silk as the vivid, vivacious and vital rhythmic breath of the cosmos at work. This empty-yet-full sublime void is something that we do not find in Pollock or Kline. Pollock's lines are the traces left on the canvas by his energy of individual explosion bordering on anger and rage. Kline's painting makes us think of the brusque structures of an industrial world. Neither of them—nor most of the Abstract Expressionists—use their colors or lines, though brimming with energy, to negotiate with the emptiness, the surrounding lifeworld, nor have they risen above to take in the larger world with a floating registering activity. We call the empty/nothing a subliminal void, because in the achieved Chinese painting, such as those we have seen, this emptiness is pulsating with the vital breath of the lifeworld. Liu Guosong's *Dance of Spiritual Rhythm* can be considered as advancing a further step from Yujian. With one or two quick, unhesitating, spontaneous, expressionistic brushstrokes, Yujian suggests a bridge, and a village. Free from the restrictive shapes defined by objects, Liu Guosong's Chinese ink (black) brushwork moves and dances in the cosmic breath, and, using the technique of *feibai* (flying-white), turns the white in the paper into nature's surging misty mist or fog.<sup>10</sup> If we put this painting side by side with his other Chinese ink-Abstract Expressionist paintings of this period, this feeling is staggering.

In Liu's *Misty Mountain Afar* (Fig. 14) we seem to be watching the sublime workings of energy moving, splashing down, flowing on, or those of fog, of cloud, of snow, or here, a water-mirror, there, pounding cataracts... or in *Eulogy for Rivers and Mountains* (Fig. 15) in which we see the white (fog? water? waterfall? snow?) surge and overflow mountain rocks (?), cliffs (?), precipices (?). Examples of this kind abound.

Interestingly, Liu's use of calligraphic lines as painting, appropriating their abstract (non-figurative) nature and their indeterminate associations, was indeed first sparked by the painter's encounter with the American Abstract Expressionists. In China, although calligraphy has long been a highly revered independent form of art for thousands of years, it has never been considered as painting as



FIG. 14 Liu Kuo-sung, *Misty Mountains Afar*, 1969  
Ink and color on paper, 58.66 × 121.46 in (149 × 308.5 cm)  
Private Collection, Taiwan



FIG. 15 Liu Kuo-sung, *Eulogy for Rivers and Mountains*, 1968  
Ink and color on paper  
15.94 × 37.4 in (40.5 × 95 cm)

such. Although calligraphic lines have been used as important textures for a painting, such as in painting orchids, bamboos, portraiture (such as the folds and lines in Shi Ke's depictions of robes), and wrinkled creases found in strange rock formations, they are more often used to complete the contour of a painted object. The idea of taking one part of a Chinese character brushed in a wild, cursive style as a full true-to-type (abstract) painting was possible only after Liu and his contemporaries came into contact with, and engaged in, tensional dialogues with modern Western painting, and with the Abstract Expressionists in particular. Besides Liu, artists such as Zao Wou-Ki (Zhao Wuji, 1921–2013) and Lui Shou-Kwan (Lü Shoukun, 1919–1975) before him, and many of his contemporaries, including Hsiao Chin (Xiao Qin, b. 1935), Chuang Zhe (Zhuang Zhe, b. 1934), and Chu Ge (1931–2011), for example, had each, in his own way, tried to use calligraphy as his main aesthetic object. Regarding his new Chinese ink paintings, Liu Guosong once said, "In fact, I am not painting mountains and rivers (landscape); but in my paintings, one feels mountains and rivers."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, he was creating painting by brushing calligraphic strokes. This is a very important decision. Because he was not consciously seeking the shapes of mountains, because he was able to unrestrainedly apply his brush of ink—"one sweep of heavy dark" (one of his titles)—now flying across, now sweeping in a slant, now twirling like a vortex, now crashing down pillarlike, now cliff-wall, teethlike cutting, now winds coming through like a sickle—free from the internalized demands for realistic formations of objects, as if for the first time, he had achieved a new, unconstrained daubing. Because of the pulses and impulses driving the ink (black) to energize the otherwise passive paper (white) in forms of palpable breathing throughout, we are made to feel, from the dances of calligraphic lines and traces left behind, there, not there, the *tremolo* of mountains and rivers. This is why paintings like *Cold Mountain: Level, Distant and Eulogy for Rivers and Mountains* evoke the semblance of the mist-vague mountains and rivers landscape of Southern Song and those of Zen paintings, something unseen by the physical eye but deeply felt by the mind's eye. Liu had produced in the 1960's a huge amount of this high-flying dance of lines and the concomitant all-inclusive excursion of the eye into the workings of clouds and mists in the Eight Limits with echoes to and changes from the above two examples. They are, in order, *The Image of May* (1963), *Clouds Amidst Deep Mountains* (1963), *Dance of The Image of Ink* (1963), *Omni-present Mountain Voice* (1964), *Dance of Spiritual Rhythm* (1964), *Wintry Mountain Covered in Snow* (1964), *Silvery Cloud on Top*

*of Mountains* (1964), *Improvisation of Autumn* (1965), *Swirling Movement* (1966), *Autumn Travelers III* (1966), *Golden Autumn* (1966), *Rocks and Snow* (1966), *And Down Goes the Water* (1967), *Windy* (1967), *Huangshan* (1966), *Through Rapids and Gorges* (1967), *So Sings the Ghostly Moon* (1967), *Windy Solitude* (1967), *Eulogy for Rivers and Mountains* (1968), *Cold Mountain, Level, Distant* (1969), and more.

The works indicated above are paintings of all calligraphic brushstrokes. (These "calligraphic-brushstrokes-alone-are-adequate" paintings are often placed in one of the two squares in his later, design-oriented paintings, to diffuse the mechanical monotony therein.)

A word about these titles, most of which have the ring of classical Chinese poetry, or an echo of those used by traditional Chinese painters whose styles he set out to overturn. It is somewhat paradoxical here. Most abstract painters tend to use "Untitled No. XX" or just use numbers to name their compositions. This means they want the viewers to feel from the atmosphere created by the colors and lines something like the sensation (or poetic state) aroused by a poem, or, in the words of Van Gogh, "One may make a poem by arranging colors alone, in the same way that you can say comforting things in music." Liu Guosong is at heart a *xieyi* (寫意) painter whose aim is to generate something like poetic feel or state in his work.<sup>12</sup> Thus, when he said "In fact, I am not painting mountains and rivers (landscape), but in my paintings, one feels mountains and rivers," he was not fully aware of the fact that his bosom has accumulated and internalized a whole reservoir of memories from classical Chinese poetry and paintings. He might not begin with any compositional blueprint, but the memories of poetic feelings from classical poetry and paintings, including certain effects of certain types of Chinese ink brushstrokes, including the unusual, strangely eye-catching "interest" of certain textures and spatial deployment of the solid and the empty, such as the idea of *empty-yet-full* we discussed above, would come hovering around the edge of his consciousness at the moment of his execution, affecting the choices in his composition. Even those who had taken oil as their medium of expression, such as Zao Wou-Ki, Xiao Qin, and Zhuang Zhe, cannot stop these memories from participating in their creation. In the case of Liu Guosong, as far back as 1960 when he did his first abstractions with plaster, ink, and color on canvas, he was already appealing to these memories as aids for the benefit of the viewers with these titles, typically in 7-character classical lines: 滾滾黃河天上來 (*The Surging Yellow River Descends from the Sky*), 我來此地聞天語 (*I Came Here to Listen to the*

*Heavenly Speeches*), 如歌如泣的泉聲 (*The Singing and Weeping Waterfall*). He was giving guiding hints to the viewers, hoping to evoke the same poetic feel in them. One of these, titled with a famous line from a *ci* (song-lyric) from a poem by the Emperor Li Yu (937–978), 春花秋月何時 (*Spring Flowers and Autumn Moon Forever* [1959]), is a large work consisting of only one dominant color: green, a unique green that one associates with certain ceramics, stretching in varying shades across the sky. With this line, are we to evoke the rest of the poem: “The past: how much is known? / Upon the tower last night, east winds blow again. / Native country: unbearable to look back amidst the bright moon. / Carved railings, jade inlays should still be there, / Only faces are changed. / How much sorrow do you have? / The way a spring river eastward flows.” Similarly, most of the titles for his calligraphic abstract paintings listed earlier seem to have a similar function. On the positive side, these titles provide an entrance into understanding the painting with a slant. On the negative side, they restrict the viewer from freer explorations. Some of the titles have been used many times before, and could easily evoke stock responses. Apparently, Liu Guosong was aware of the problem.

One day in the early 1970's, I was asked to have dinner at his house (in Taipei). After dinner, he laid out several of his new paintings, and asked me to title them. At the time, I had been using some avant-garde language strategies and completed a series of landscape poems under the title “Sky Meditations.” Here is one of them:

Suddenly  
Lit up from silence  
Mountain  
Sheen  
Wrinkled by fast winds

So I titled one of his paintings 吹皺的山光 (*Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles*).<sup>13</sup> Two more were offered: 月裏是山山裏月 (*Inside the Moon, a Mountain; Inside the Mountain, a Moon*) and 灑落的山音 (*Omnipresent Mountain Voice*). Whether these titles sit well with his paintings is not the key here. He clearly felt that titles lifted out of the old tradition easily fall into the commonplace. He was hoping to open up fresher imaginative space by using modernist poetic phrasings. The use of poetic lines,



FIG. 16 Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), *Mont Ste Victoire*, 1902–1906  
Oil on canvas, 25.5 × 32 in (64.8 × 81.3 cm).  
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Helen Tyson Madeira, 1977-288-1

regardless from old or new texts, is to help evoke the right intended poetic feel. All this goes to show: Liu is through and through a *xieyi* painter.

### 3. Collaged Landscape: The search for textures; layering constructions

Now a word about Abstraction. The word is quite often taken to mean non-figurative in relation to figurative, but this is a more restricted meaning. For many abstract painters, and for Chinese abstract painters in particular, the distinction between form and formlessness is totally arbitrary. One can ask, for example, has atmosphere form or no form? The Chinese like to use the word *yi* (feel or feeling, sense-of-things) to represent water-feeling, autumn-feeling, and the word *xiang* (form) as in air-form (for atmosphere) and wind-form. None of the above is visible to the eye, but totally feelable and concrete. Thus, Laozi said, “To see and see not .../ continuous, it cannot be named, / and returns to nothingness .../ the condition of no shape, / the form of no things... Dao as such / is seen, unseen / Seen, unseen/there is, in it something forming / Forming, unforming / there are, in it, things” (*Laozi*, 14; *Laozi*, 21). Chinese painters always believe that to stick to form is a lower form of art; a higher form of art is to catch that sublime atmosphere open to imaginative excursion. Nature, in its vastness, is not to be measured by forms seen just by the naked eye; but rather, it should be a feel for its continuous forming/unforming activity.

But, with their departure from literal representation of concrete objects toward the non-figurative, all abstract painters must face the question of constituting textures into an architecture of art. One of the staples of modernist art, to borrow a phrase from Edgar Allan Poe so highly revered by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, is that “no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem”: an abstract painter has to attend to the spatial deployment of his colors and lines the same way. From the Post-Impressionist Cézanne to Kandinsky to Kupka to Mondrian, attention to detail-building is paramount. One of Cézanne’s *Mont Ste Victoire* paintings, which was the forerunner of analytical Cubism, is most instructive (Fig. 16). Expanding the juxtaposition of dots of colors to achieve new color sensations in pointillism to a juxtaposition of patches of colors, Mondrian slowly modulates these sensations to a certain heightened density and complexity, giving us a sense of sculptural, architectonic weight, leading to pictorial unification.

Liu Guosong’s interweaving of his colors, lines, and textures in his Chinese ink abstract paintings was clearly learned from Cézanne, but with a twist: the making and invention of his unique textures. His search for new textures using Chinese ink and paper began in 1962 in his two pieces submitted to the 2nd International Salon in Hong Kong, which won him First Prize. In these vertical scrolls, we detect now dark gray, now white lines apparently created by the artist by folding the paper in irregular fashion before applying ink, evoking the effect of light casting levelly sideways across the uneven rock surfaces. Then, holding different clumps or balls of crushed paper of different angular concave and convex surfaces, he would dip them in dense, dark ink and emboss layer after layer on the lighter texture of irregular vertical fold-lines, giving the paper’s thin surface a rock-heavy, rock-thick feel. Then comes the now famous texture he, by chance, unexpectedly



FIG. 17 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Mass of Light*, 1968

Ink and color on paper, 22.72 x 35.24 in (57.7 x 89.5 cm)

discovered and invented—the most interesting irregular twists of white lines shown on the backside of the painted rice paper under light; these lines are the paper “sinews” which the ink cannot penetrate. He first experimented by painting on the back surface of the rice paper, focusing on, and negotiating with the “sinews” and then pulled them out. The resultant textures are wonderfully rich, something the Chinese brush can never achieve. In a sense, these twisting patterns belong to self-so Nature, accidental and nature-made and can be classified as a sort of “found art” as in the collages of Picasso. Because the backside of the rice paper cannot accommodate finer applications, Liu Guosong contracted a rice paper maker to make specially for him reams of new paper with “sinews”, and more and larger “sinews” of his designation, on the frontside. It was on these “invented” (almost trademarked Liu™) paper that he painted some of the most staggering abstracts, such as those enumerated above.

Anybody confronting for the first time these calligraphic lines must be astounded at how he did them, wondering how he was able to achieve these rich varying patterns of twists within the ink of a brushstroke, which, following the demands of the energy that is driving it along, *must not and cannot*, at that juncture of time, leave the paper. If we now revisit the details in Liu’s *Dance of Spiritual Rhythm*, the twisting white textures in the lower part of the calligraphic stroke demand us, or put us in a position, to look at it closely. In the meantime, the whole picture puts us simultaneously at a highpoint in the sky to view, now high, now low, now distant, now close...as the calligraphic strokes appear as mountain ridges now seen, now unseen in the surging mist, echoing the perceptual activity we discussed in great detail in Section 2.

At about this time, Liu Guosong experimented profusely with his newfound textures. He would brush (quite often with Western-type paint brushes, including the type used to clean gun-barrels) on the frontside, and on the backside, some with dominant black ink, some with dominant empty whiteness, some with colors. He would tear these into smaller pieces in the shapes of rocks or mountain peaks, and juxtapose them into a series of mountains or hills in layers with larger ones in the background, leaving a mist-infused empty middle trembling with mist-infused light. Or he would create collaged landscapes, layer after layer into thickly woven mysterious interiors of mountains. Or paper patches of different textures with different distances, now linked, now cut off, stretching into the distance where all distances disappear. Like Cézanne’s modulation of colors, Liu Guosong’s collaged landscape patches slowly build up a Cubist sense of all times, that is, all memory fragments squeezed into a world either of no exit or a space into which and out of each residual visual chord of feelings constantly moves (Figs. 17-20).

#### 4. Science, Space Eye, Mathematical / Design Thinking

1968. The pictures transmitted back to Earth from the unmanned spaceship have totally subverted all our imaginations of, and writings about both the Earth and the Moon. And the Earth, so closely connected with our body, breath, movements, and with millions of other coeval, coexisting ecosystems, is now but another moon, a mere circle, roaming in Space. This de-familiarization leads to a shocking enlightenment, as we are reminded of



FIG. 18 Liu Kuo-sung, *The Metaphysics of Rocks*, 1968  
Ink and acrylic with collage on paper, 27 x 26.5 in (68.6 x 67.3 cm).  
Private collection, Taiwan

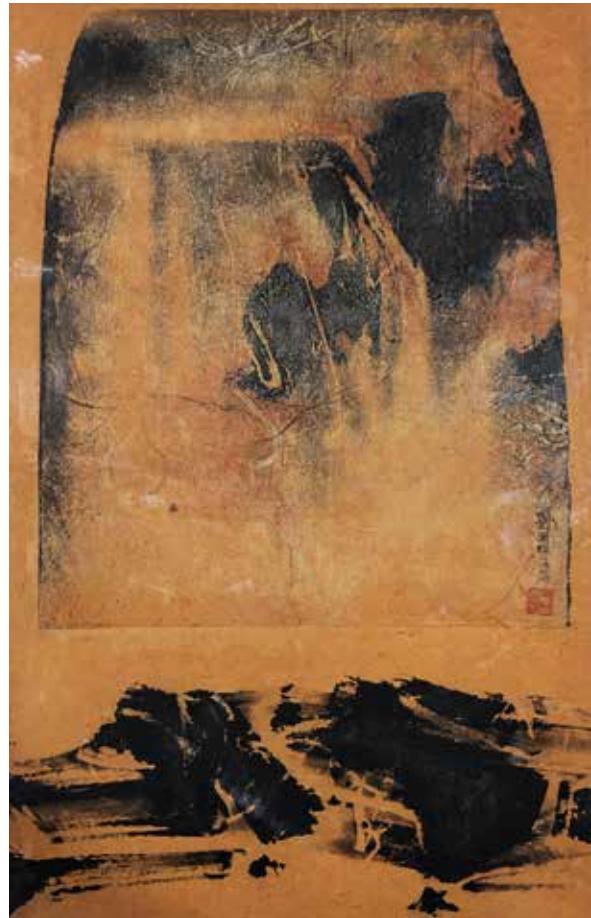


FIG. 20 Liu Kuo-sung, *Loftiness*, 1966  
Ink and color with collage on paper mounted on canvas  
35.43 x 22.76 in (90 x 57.8 cm)

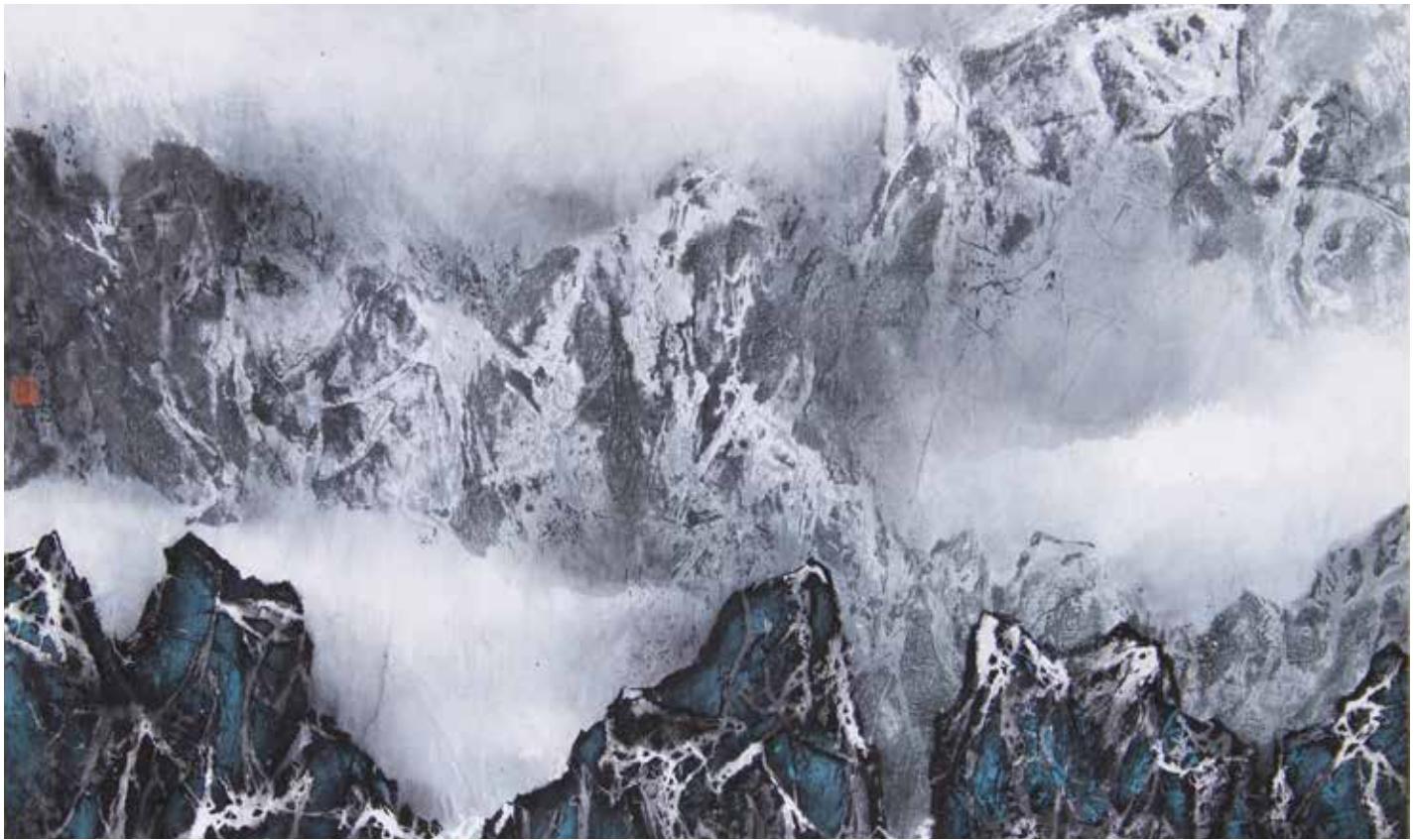


FIG. 19 Liu Kuo-sung, *Omnipresent Mountain Voice*, 1968  
Ink and color on paper, 22.24 x 36.61 in (56.5 x 93 cm). Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection, England

something humankind has never experienced, darkly sublime, deep, impenetrable, yet touchable as if were, more real and solid as never before across vast Space. Scientific discoveries of this sort have always stimulated creative imagination. The discoveries made by Galileo of more celestial bodies in Space with his telescope, affirming Copernicus' thesis that the Universe was heliocentric rather than geocentric (for which he was punished by the Roman Curia, because, indirectly, he had rendered the Christian construction of power hierarchy based on the geocentric view totally arbitrary) have engendered the visual representation of many poets. Milton, for one, has used "the optick glass" to present vast mountains and rivers in his *Paradise Lost*. In Taiwan, in the 1960's, the experience of air travel led Chen Qikuan to create a vertical landscape with the sun on one end and the moon on the other. The visual experience of space travel (as transmitted through the media) led Chen Tingshi to move higher and higher to view "the Sun on a Spaceship" (the title of one of his woodblock prints), echoing Liu Guosong, many of whose vast sublime representations of Space after Armstrong's landing on the moon have won significant affirmations from art critics in the West.

The view of our Earth (hustling, bustling, brimming with agonies and elations), now strangely quiet, cold and unfamiliar, necessarily stimulates the artist into philosophical musing. Before this, we had the many challenges of Plato and God. Let us begin with Pater's famous statement in his book *The Renaissance*, which says that it is "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, [which] is the end, ... to burn always with this gem-like flame."<sup>14</sup> While ancient thought sought "to arrest every object in an eternal outline [Yip: *Plato's Logos*]," the modern spirit asserts that "nothing is or can be rightly known except relatively and under conditions.... [Modern man becomes] so receptive, all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing upon him, so that every hour in his life is unique, changed altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch. It is the truth of these relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of gradations."<sup>15</sup>

Following Pater, T. E. Hulme's reflection is particularly relevant:

The ancients were perfectly aware of the fluidity of the world and its impermanence . . . but while they recognized it, they feared it and endeavored to evade it to construct things of permanence which would stand fast in this universal flux which frightened them. They had the disease, the passion, for immortality. They wished to construct things which would be proud boasts that they, man, were immortal. We see it in a thousand different forms, materially in the pyramids, spiritually in the dogmas of religion and in the hypostatized ideas of Plato.<sup>16</sup>

After Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead," many philosophers have continued the quest for answers. In Space, now facing the concrete circulation of our Earth, the Moon, and other celestial bodies, how do we think, and what is thinking? Liu Guosong answers with his visual meditations, *Roaming on the Moon* and a series of views of the Earth from Space entitled: *Which is Earth?* (all 1969).

Looking out from the Spaceship at the endlessly empty stretching cosmos, suddenly we seem to remember Cézanne's claim that the world is made of "cylinders, cones, and circles." Indeed, only circles are seen circulating in this endless Space. All the jungles, forests, huge mountains, long rivers, and gigantic

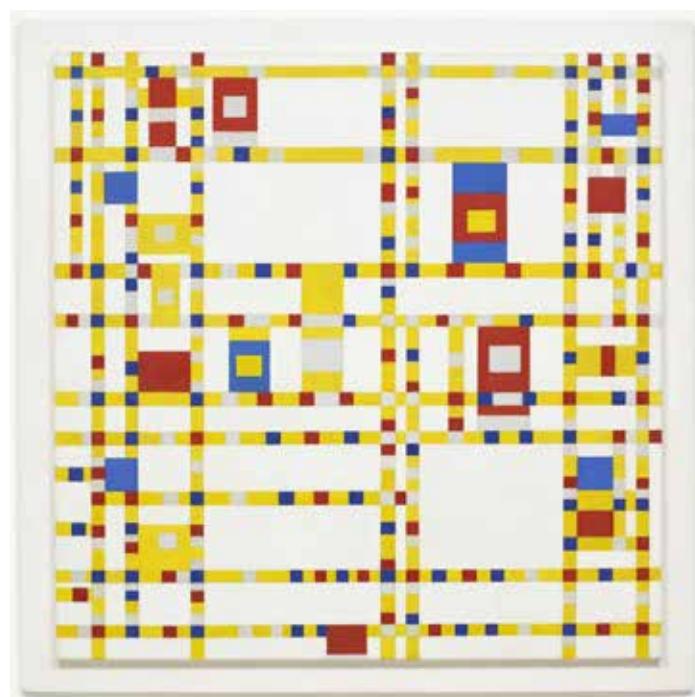


FIG. 21 Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–43

Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 in (127 × 127 cm). Given anonymously.

The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. ©2021 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust

buildings and monuments are reduced to a few calligraphic strokes of Liu Guosong's paintings. By chance, at about this time, Mondrian's design-oriented color squares became a dominant part of design on the walls of many city buildings. Liu first concentrated on circles with his varying calligraphic strokes suggestive of images of Earth viewed from Space. Later, he introduced squares (sometimes blank, sometimes with calligraphic strokes) to interplay with the circles. There are many design-oriented variations of this interplay between these squares and circle or circles. Whether the pairing of circle and square has its roots in ancient Chinese speculative view of seeing the sky as round and earth as square can be a subject for further investigation. I am tempted to bring out the metamorphoses of Mondrian's color squares as a gauge to view those of Liu. The color squares in Mondrian came from a long series of metamorphoses from his painting *Evening: Red Tree*, which was formed (trunk and branches all recognizable) with passionate expressionist brushwork. This tree, in a series of demonstrations by the artist, underwent several metamorphoses, changing from vertical and horizontal lines to rational and basically cool squares for new constructions of mathematical temperament. Later, when Mondrian looked back, he found these to be too static and stripped of energy and power. He decided to do a dynamic version, still using color squares as textures. This became *Broadway Boogie Woogie* which attempts to catch the flashing lights of the city moving left and right, up and down (Fig. 21).

Liu Guosong's design-oriented circles and squares are also rational and cool, and, after some time, he, too, felt them to be too static and mechanical despite his attempt to use calligraphic fragments (with associations of the surging of memories) to defuse these effects. Like Mondrian, he wanted to bring back dynamism to offset monotony, as disclosed in one of the titles of his paintings of this period: *Moving? Staying?* In many of his large paintings of the movement of the sun or of the moon, he effectively uses the cinematic technique of freezes or stop motion, such as is in



**FIG. 22** Liu Kuo-sung, *Midnight Sun II*, 1985  
Ink and acrylic on paper, 72.83 x 249.21 in (185 x 633 cm). Take A Step Back Collection, Hong Kong

### *The Rising Sun, The Feeling of Sunrise, Eclipse, Midnight Sun I, Midnight Sun II and Rhythm of the Moon.*

In *Midnight Sun* (1985), less than one third of the lower portion of this 181.5 x 632.5 cm horizontal, long scroll is taken up by the outline of a slightly, slightly curved line reaching from one side of the painting surface to the other, forming what seems to be a small part on the circumference of the circular Earth (Fig. 22). Within it are irregular calligraphic strokes with all the trademark textures of Liu's earlier paintings, suggesting that we are looking out from the Earth, or are we? The location from which viewers look out is at best ambiguous, because if we see only a small curve of the circular Earth, we have to be hanging in mid-Space, hovering over it, as it were. And yet, we feel as if we are lying on our stomachs upon the surface, waiting for a significant event to happen. Along the curve is a stretch of thin mist-infused light, imperceptibly trembling on the edge. Beyond this misty light, on the larger portion of the rectangle, in the orange yellow and earth yellow atmosphere, we see 7 suns of different gradations of hue, each a *frozen moment's epiphany*, riding over or across the Earth. This arrangement—to preset the camera to take in the sun's activity in 7 slots

of time—is to allow us adequate time to meditate on / or to immerse ourselves in, each of its happenings, because the Grand Workings of Space seems to be all within our reach, in a zone in which we tremble with the pulsation of the cosmos. No wonder Liu Guosong hangs his red seal of A Man from East, West, South, North high up in the sky; he is indeed the writer of a new Sublime Space. He constantly crosses borders, continuously transforms outside artistic ideas and strategies by localizing them, continuously subverts, and defamiliarizes his deadened tradition/s to effect new re-incarnations. On his returning road to tradition in his later paintings, he no longer needs to escape traditional ways of deployment, because he continuously experiments with the weaving and interweaving of new textures, many of which, we no longer can classify or enumerate here, because with his large continually renewing textures and strategies, he has reached the point that he can turn the moribund into the miraculous.

This article was previously published in the exhibition catalogue *A Man of East, West, South and North: Liu Guosong's 80th Birthday Retrospective Exhibition* (Yi ge dong xi nan bei ren: Liu Guosong 80 shui huiguzhan), ed. Chao-yi Tsai (Taichung, Taiwan: National Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 28-51.

### Notes

- 1 Terms borrowed from Charles Olson and Robert Creeley's "Projective Verse"; as we will see later, this idea was indebted to Ezra Pound.
- 2 Roger Fry (1866–1934). In 1901, Fry organized for Grafton Galleries in London the large-scale exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, that showcased these new artists, and included Van Gogh and Cézanne. It was Fry who coined the term "Post-Impressionists." Fry's knowledge of Chinese art and his ways of lifting elements from within it, highlighting them in terms that spoke to Modernist obsessions, was a rich source, and should not be overlooked. See the recent work of Hsiu-ling Lin, "Reconciling Bloomsbury's Aesthetic of Formalism with Politics of Anti-Imperialism: Roger Fry's and Clive Bell's Interpretation of Chinese Art," *Concentric: Studies in English Literature and Linguistics* 27, no. 1 (Jan. 2001): 149–190.
- 3 Fry's essay, based on a lecture he had given at the end of the Post-Impressionist exhibition the year before, was originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* 89, no. 533 (May 1, 1911): 856–67.
- 4 *Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, ed. John J. Deeney (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1980), 155–178.
- 5 In 1944 Mark Tobey asked his friend Elisabeth Willis to show his *Bars and Flails* to Jackson Pollock who took time to study it and produced his famous *Blue Poles*. See Delores Tarzan Ament, "Mark Tobey: Old Master of the Young American Painting", posted 2/16/2003, HistoryLink.org, <https://www.historylink.org/file/5217>. This essay also records Pollock as saying that he had a deep impression of Tobey's netlike painting made of dense white lines and that this kind of real painting can only appear in New York.
- 6 Mark Tobey, exh. cat. *Aus Briefen und Gesprächen* (Dusseldorf: Dusseldorfer Kunsthalle, 1966).
- 7 Allan Kaprow was also very much influenced by the Daoist, Zen Buddhist John Cage. See my "Daoism, Zen, and the American Avant-garde: John Cage and Allan Kaprow [Daojia jingshen, chanzong yu Meiguo qianwei yishu: Qiji (John Cage) yu Kapuluo (Alan Kaprow)], *Chung-Wai Literary Quarterly* [Zhongwai wenxue], 29, no. 6 (November 2000): 77–99.
- 8 Liu Kuo-sung, "Huihua de xiagu: cong shiwu jie Quansheng meizhan shuo qi" [The Valley of Painting: A Discussion Starting with the 15th All-Province Art Exhibition], *Wenxing* (Apollo) 7, no. 3 (January 1961).
- 9 These works were very much on the forefront in books on Zen in the United States during the 1950's. For the Chinese influence on Japan, please read my *Pound and the Eight Views of Xiao Xiang* (Taipei National Taiwan University Press, 2008).
- 10 See discussion of calligraphy above: "A stroke can sometimes skip part of the paper before ending onto another part, leaving a middle portion without any ink—and this is called *feibai* or 'flying -white.' However, what is broken is only the brush-stroke, the material dimension, so to speak, the energy that drives the stroke has never been disrupted."
- 11 See my *Yu dangdai yishujia de duihua* [Dialogues with Contemporary Artists] (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1987, 1996), 238.
- 12 [Xieyi: lit. "sketching the idea," is often translated as "freehand painting." This term refers to painting executed in an intuitive and spontaneous manner]
- 13 [The English translation for this title given by the Li Kuo-sung Archive is *Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles*, which is used elsewhere in the Reader]
- 14 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1922), 236–7.
- 15 Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 66–8.
- 16 T. E. Hulme, *Further Speculation*, ed. Sam Hynes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 70–71.

**John Clark**

**THE TRADITION OF CHINESE PAINTING RECONCEIVED:  
LIU GUOSONG AND MODERNITY**  
1996

As is clear from the accompanying bibliography, there are many books and catalogues which present or analyze Liu Guosong's work and its development. It would be easy to move through a series of citations of this earlier material to a rehearsal of the opinions and approaches of others. Instead, I want here to adopt a longer analytical view to consider how his work indicates various and sometimes contradictory ways of re-conceiving the Chinese pictorial tradition and the various notions of modernity which these re-conceptions imply.

Liu Guosong's work stands at a kind of turning point where the status of Chinese painting, seen by a good many Chinese artists as formally exhausted or obsolescent, was given by its placement in a history of world art where it was compared with that contemporary "Western" modernism. His painting shows a radical development in the 1960s by the simplification of forms and the citation of Chinese pictorial marks via their abstraction and technical redeployment. As I see it, his work lacks recognition of non-Chinese contemporary artists outside the circle of sinophiles and sinologists. This was due not so much to "Western" artists' ignorance of the "non-Western"—despite thirty years of incorporations of East Asian pictorial motifs, concepts, and techniques in some "Western" art. Nor was it wholly due in to its relative social isolation in circles which thought themselves sympathetic to an essentialized "Chinese" culture. Lack of recognition was principally due to a conceptual closure where such art placed itself in a binary relation from which there was no escape: the essential but transformed art with "Chinese" characteristics on the one side; the Western, dominant, "abstract" art on the other.

This conceptual placement was also period-specific in the 1960s and place-specific in Taiwan. This "national" ideological closure did not also mean a closure to the "international" level, unless we conceive cultural relations between art discourses at that time to have been wholly dominated by the Cold War. Of course, international cultural spaces had been filled by politically motivated American triumphalism about Abstract Expressionism. But the rise to international recognition of the abstract expressionism of Pollock, Rothko, or Newman, followed by the recognition of popist expressionism with Rauschenberg's winning the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964, was also a feature of the strength of the New York art market and the dynamic strength of those artistic tendencies themselves, however convenient their promotion was for the political ends of the United States. The 1950s and 1960s were not like the late 1980s, when the hybridity and cross-culturality of art forms, practices, and concepts was recognized, even privileged, by post-modernism and post-colonialism in "Western" critical discourses. In addition, and almost simultaneously in the 1990s, daily flows in the economy, cultural practice, and ideas across many levels and types of boundaries could be understood under conditions of globalization.

Whether Liu Guosong's transformations in the 1960s and their subsequent development by him were against "tradition" can be debated. Or, they can be seen as simply a discourse of re-positioning "tradition" in the absence of a developed and politically autonomous art criticism at that time in Taiwan, a lack which continued until the 1980s in the extended "Chinese" world. We should not confuse discussing how to position his work with an understanding of the historical development as such of a modern *guohua* or ink painting. Many artists contributed to this development; to give some notable examples, from Zeng Youhe (Tseng Yu-ho) in Hawaii and Tang Haiwen in Paris, Lü Shoukun (Lui Shou-kwan) and Wang Wuxie (Wucius Wong) in Hong Kong, to Chen Qikuan (Chen Chi-kwan) and others in Taiwan. They were later to be followed in the 1980s by Wang Gongyi and in the early 1990s by Zhu Qingsheng. After 1990, a large group of artists in Tianjin and Beijing, although mostly figurative, used the earlier advent of a conservative conceptualization of literati painting in the Xinwenren ["New Literati] school at Nanjing, as an opportunity to freely redeploy and transform traditional figure types or ink effects. Many artists in the late 1980s and 1990s manipulated the conceptual features of the Chinese horizontal or vertical scroll painting format, like Liu Dan, to claim a different aesthetic position for the viewer or change the spatial concept for the notion of the art work.

Other artists working in oils or acrylics overseas, above all Zhao Wuji (Zao Wou-ki) and Zhu Dequn (Chu Teh-Chun) in France, had "abstracted"—that is generalized from—the features of Chinese landscape painting or calligraphy into an imaginary visual world where this reference almost entirely lost its cultural essentialism, and became what might be called a generalized "Chinese imaginary." Significantly, Zhao Wuji's work was always linked to major European modernist art of its time in other media, such as the poetry of Henri Michaud or the music of Edgar Varése. This may account for its overseas recognition as coming from a particular modernist milieu as much as from a "Chinese" modernist background.

Liu Guosong's work has never been positioned in this kind of international modernist discourse. Nor with the exception of one or two experiments has he wished to use the arrangement of the pictorial format, except by unusual scale, to question or otherwise interact with the marks or other collaged effects deployed on its surface.

What Liu Guosong did in the early 1960s was to relativize the status of the mark or the discriminable brushstroke against an order of visual perception taken from his conceptions of Euramerican modernist painting. This allowed him to simulate what seemed like the effects of a brush, but were in many cases the non-brushed results of ink and media interactions such as scratching, spraying, and tearing out of strips inset into certain kinds of Japanese paper he had painted, which produced the semblance of

brush effects on a wrinkled ground. Certainly they reproduced the effects of depth and tonal gradation found in some pre-modern "Chinese" landscape paintings, or which were implicit within the overall compositional structure of specific works.

These new techniques formed an essential catalyst to questions he attempted to formulate theoretically through borrowings from Chinese literati discourse which was highly textual. In the 1960s Liu Guosong was quite well informed about the way technique could become its own subject from the ideas and images available through reproduced works, books and magazines reaching the US Information Service library in Taipei, or through information sent back from Italy by Xiao Qin (Hsiao Ch'in) which appeared in newspapers and magazines in Taiwan. The frequent visual references to famous Chinese paintings which continually recur in his work are those of an artist whose understanding of abstraction is about a relationship between art works—and frequently a kind of technical knowledge about the pictorial relationship between line, space, and materialized form—and not a relationship with a level of mental perception and imagination, or with a representation of reality from which his formal discourse allows him to withdraw or transcend. This is why his work is so peculiarly easy to assimilate to the lineage of a "Chinese" pictorial discourse, because they are in a sense relatively distant from the kinds of philosophic or poetic confrontations with other discourses which confronted and so much informed or strengthened the work of Zhao Wuji and much later Gao Xingjian in Europe. You also see this strength widely in those artists who placed their work within a surrealist or feminist interpretive frame, such as the late artist Chen Xingwan (Chen Hsing-Wan) of Taiwan.

Liu Guosong's works served as a field for technical innovation first, particularly his use of torn threads from a particular kind of paper to produce a sense of wrinkled and weathered but stubbornly present forms. He then used these imaginatively unfolded possibilities as a model for other technical innovations. These sometimes radical breaks with the association of a mark—as naturalized in Chinese visual discourses—may well have been the most important hint for future ink painters trying to get away from closed literati prescriptions of brush marks and wash effects.

But technical privileging of the mark, however much it might be deduced from a straightforward or even naïve interpretation of photographic images he saw of Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Rothko—among some of his verbally and visually identifiable sources—involves a notion of abstraction and a function for this artistic stance within his working practice, not merely a post-facto rhapsodizing of its poetic effects. That carries with it the dangers of a merely decorative abstraction devoid of formal discursive power and without richly imaginative content, whatever the ostensible privilege it acquires from association with any given culturally defined visual lineage. One can see this danger in some of Liu's long handscrolls and many of the "Moon" motif works which lack the subdued cosmological power of their earlier avatars. What, in further detail, has been Liu Guosong's understanding of abstraction, and why was it important for the world of Chinese ink painting?

Some scholars like Jonathan Hay consider that Chinese painting is "unburdened by the concept of mimesis," and takes what he calls an "inscriptive" approach to representational images, and that "there is no figure and ground in Chinese ink painting, only a combined figure-ground continuum in which the ground is generated from the figure and vice versa." Combined with formats which

require lateral viewing, Hay thinks that Chinese paintings "characteristically present themselves as fragments of a larger visual field, rather than as self-contained structures that defer to the geometry of the frame." I think it unlikely that the realistic representations and plastic effects of color, tonal intensity, shade, and line found in many pre-modern but non-literati Chinese paintings can allow the unreserved application of Hay's synthesis as a starting point for understanding pictorial modernity in China. But there is no doubt it shows that one starting point for abstraction in Chinese ink painting is likely to be due to an attempt to generalize pictorial conventions, the ways brush marks leave effects on different media even though the effect may no longer be generated by a brush, to generalize the way formats and compositional devices allow a sense of a multiple planar and non-totalized visual space which comprises that of the representation within the painting format, and to problematize the ground of the painting as a pictorial element or domain. In short, abstraction functions as a kind of generalization of pictorial effects and principles which necessarily transcends the historical, rather than a naturalization of such effects in a genealogy of historical and semantic/ideographic associations with particular works or positions in the literati painting discourse, as re-interpreted in 20th century China. Because such abstraction attempts to relativize past pictorial associations between a meaning beyond the pictorial format and the representation within it, associations which were reinforced by the ties of inscriptive ideographic images to physical, plastic marks, then abstraction in ink painting has tended to monumentalize the examples it chooses to generalize from, or seek those works already deemed monuments. The position is particularly clear in the multiple references to famous paintings in Liu Guosong's paintings, rather than to complex expressions of human emotion or the deceptive simplicity of daily life. Where is the regret for a broken promise, the hope for a reconciliation, where is the scent of flowers, the touch of a child's hand, the warmth of rice upon the table? It may be that Liu Guosong's immense nostalgic longing for a China which could only ever have existed as an idea or in an imaginary space, is the inverse of his own extraordinarily bitter and deprived childhood and his sense of lack at the human love he thinks he did not have.

This too may be the source of Liu Guosong's wish—one might almost call it a cold, unworldly and mathematical desire because of its seeming impersonality—to reconstitute Chinese tradition rather than abandon it, to modernize Chinese ink painting rather than negate it. Apart from his obvious resistance to the more restrictive aspects of tradition which for him is symbolized by the Chinese literati tradition, he does not engage with the issue that to rebel against tradition is to create that tradition, that tradition is the pair of the modern, indeed that the modern is the progenitor of the tradition, not the other way around.

Liu Guosong thinks that art itself is an abstract word and thus the methods of an expressive art are themselves abstract. Abstract painting is discriminable into an idealized (*lixingde*) abstract and sensate (*ganxingde*) abstract. He also holds to fantastical views—which are held by other Chinese artists—that abstraction in Chinese art preceded that of the "West" by 700 years, and that "Western" abstraction began to develop via indirect contact with Chinese notions through their absorption in Japanese ukiyo-e. This view is art historically primitive since Japanese ukiyo-e had absorbed "Western" perspective and all manner of optical mimetic devices at least since the 1720s, that is 100 to 150 years before

ukiyo-e had an impact in Western Europe, even before we consider the autonomous trajectories of "Western" "abstraction." But these propositions were convenient in allowing Liu Guosong to proclaim the antiquity of "abstract" art in China, its temporal antecedence with that of the West, and the debt of Western abstraction to East Asian visual discourse.

I do not propose to interrogate these views which cannot be taken seriously, but we should note how sensitive was the period in which were advanced, when the notion that abstraction in art was not simply a kind of "bourgeois formalism" had only shortly before been advanced in the Chinese art world, and when China was itself in the midst of a "spiritual pollution" campaign which could very easily have been turned against any kind of non-realist and potentially class recidivist art, such as abstraction. He certainly thought that to advance a position on abstraction from within the Chinese traditions was more appropriate than from a misconceived understanding of Western abstraction which in China had barely advanced beyond that of Fauvism. Indeed the most significant defence of Liu Guosong came from the oil painter and proponent of abstractionism Wu Guanzhong in 1983, who while acknowledging that his paintings presented new and fresh features "there would definitely be some people who would not understand or be used to them." He further defends the value of Liu Guosong's work because, "a Chinese has progressed Chinese traditional painting a step forward towards a new era, and in his showing the special characteristics and pride of East Asian art to the Western world [his work] should raise our attention and excitement."

Here can be seen that abstraction of China's return to creativity as what is valued in Liu Guosong's work. There is a formal homology between the desire for this on the part of many Chinese intellectuals, let alone art world authorities, and Liu Guosong's personal drive to abstract this spirit through technical redeployment of effects.

Liu Guosong was among the first artists from Taiwan to visit China in 1981, where he had sent two works to participate in the activities to inaugurate the Chinese Painting Research Institute. It was on this occasion that he was invited by the then chairman of the Artists' Association Jiang Feng to send a solo exhibit to Beijing, which he did in February 1983 when the characters for the exhibition title were written by Li Keran. A measure of the importance of the exhibition was a text published at the time by the oil painter Wu Guanzhong. Without using the words "abstract" or "abstraction" Wu Guanzhong subjects Liu Guosong's work to largely abstract analysis, seeing that "the pivotal emphasis of the subject is the structural placement of the resolved pictorial plane.... If this structural placement lacks intellectual resolution and craftsmanship, it will have wasted the valuable ground and thus the pictorial plane will fall into banality, its composition must be unrefined, and the breath resonance absolutely cannot be dynamic, a harm that cannot be compensated for by brush and ink [effects]."

This perspective of the early 1980s also confirms how Liu Guosong's conception of the abstract is technically founded in terms of pictorial dispositions. But he largely arrived at these ideas in the early 1960s through his understanding of American Abstract Expressionism; that is, they were prior to the rise of conceptual Popism and Minimalism in Euramerica. This may account for the lack of a distinction in his ideas between "the abstract" and the "process of abstraction," and thus for his work being different from a 1920s European conception where, "[For] Mondrian the abstract

is not all the analysis of a visual form but on the contrary he actually believes more in the existence of a kind of pure 'soul' in the cosmos."

One might think that "abstraction" for Liu Guosong is a process where through apparently spontaneously achieved visual forms he revolts against the ossified Chinese tradition at the same time as borrowing Western abstraction to renew Chinese ink painting. What has been called "abstract" in his work is the result of this process of "abstraction" which is a kind of technical hybridization of effects between anachronistically fused formal discourses and processes mapped by the two cultural poles postulated by him as "China" or "The East" (Dongfang) and the "West." What he calls "abstract" is actually a notion of "China" revivified and able to hold its own from contact with the "West," as part of a process which had external causes in the first half of the 20th century but which Pi Daojian thinks "spontaneously moved to self-realization" in its second half, chiefly through younger artists.

If for Liu Guosong "abstraction" is a variously constructed technical sublimation of "China", perhaps to conclude we should analyze what that technical construction is from recent works. Here Liu Guosong's prowess and contribution as a painter become clearer.

He appears to have moved away from a figure-ground relationship where the inscriptive qualities of various marks—variously carrying repositioned residues of pre-modern painting or their compositions—carried resonances of a transcendental landscape into which the viewer entered, somewhat analogously to the wandering through a landscape in a "lonely traveler" mode seen in so many ink landscapes since the Northern Song. But whatever the references to actual paintings, this is pre-eminently a conceptual extension where the movement of the artist's and thus the audience's gaze becomes a surrogate for the missing traveler who would have been figuratively denoted earlier in that Chinese painting which had emerged in the literati tradition. Likewise the emotional tenor of rough transition through the serried grandeur of marked peak-like protrusions, or over Liu Guosong's belovedly embraced "wrinkled" skin-texture effects on the painting ground, is a kind of substitute for the inscriptive reinforcement via poetic citation and literary metaphor found in the writings on literati paintings.

From about 2001, according to available reproductions, Liu Guosong begins to work with all-over grounds with little ostensible residue of an aerial passage through the mental frame of the picture, nor much sense of a manipulation of figure-and-ground effects. Furthermore his employment of color is much less nominal or descriptively decorative than in his later "Moon" paintings and seems to work in bands which inflect the surface, so the surface of the painting ground itself rises and falls. This is much less hysterical or demonstrative work than earlier, and more subtly indicative of a cooler and explorative relation to the picture overall. Perhaps a certain distance of the abstracted "China" has been achieved, a kind of thing-like but nonetheless living evocation of a mind-frame and a compositional deployment. There is here a sometimes dry, sometimes resonantly distanced engagement.

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## Notes

- 1 Such is the tenor of many of the polemical articles published by Liu in the early 1960s and collected as *Zhongguo Xiantai Huihua de Lu* [The Path of Modern Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Wenxing shudian, 1965). For critiques of this book see John Clark, "Liu Guosong's, *The Road of Chinese Painting*," *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 27 & 28 (1995-96): 33-56. [paper originally written in 1984], Chen Hsiang-chun, *The Problems of the Art Theory and Practice of Liu Kuo-Sung*, M.A. Thesis, Power Department of Fine Art, University of Sydney, 1994, and Kao Yi-li, "The Site of Strategic Positioning: Liu Guosong's Modern Ink Painting," conference paper 2004, at <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg>
- 2 For a period contextualization see Chu-tsing Li, *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1969).
- 3 Liu Guosong's catalogues meticulously list the foreign texts which have mentioned his work, generally those dealing with some aspect of East Asian or Chinese art. It may be somewhat disheartening, but mention of his work is not included, even as a reference for other artists, in standard surveys of Euramerican art such as Hal Foster, Rosalind Kraus, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004). Liu Guosong is not alone, and this is not just a phenomenon of the recognition internationally of modern Chinese art in Chinese media. Like many other innovations in modern art outside Euramerica, this has merely passed these scholars by.
- 4 See for example, Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art Between East and West* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers and Amstelveen: Cobra Museum voor Modern Kunst, 1996). This book is about much more than "Zen" and deals with the whole pictorial context of so-called "East-West" interactions in North America and Europe during the 1950s.
- 5 Even though Liu saw Chinese art as anticipating what he called "abstract art" in the West by many centuries. See Clark, 1995-96, the section "The situation of modern Chinese painting."
- 6 See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 7 See Zeng Youhe, *Chuantong Zhongguo de Xiandai* [The Modernity of Traditional China] (Taipei: Dongda, 1996 [original of 1962]). This book precisely tries to advance 24 qualities of traditional Chinese painting which the author thinks are also found in contemporary [Euramerican] art and was originally published in English in 1963.
- 8 On Zhao Wuji see most comprehensively to the mid-1980s, Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-Ki* (Paris: ditions Cercle d'Art, 1986).
- 9 See Hubert Juin, *Chu Teh-Chun* (Paris: Le musée de Poche, 1979).
- 10 On Liu Guosong's several technical innovations see Lang Shaojun, "Liu Guosong zai Dalu" [Liu Guosong in Mainland China], *Longyu Wenwu Yishu*, October 1992, 85.
- 11 Liu Guosong in the 1960s was quite contradictory about the separation of pictorial marks from their cultural associations. See Clark, 1995-6, section on "The situation of Chinese painting."
- 12 An attempt to systematize the relationship between Liu Guosong's personal background and his stylistic expression can be found in Wang Sufeng,
- 13 See Jonathan Hay, "Sanyu's Animals," in *Sanyu, L'écriture du Corps / Language of the Body*, ed. Rita Wong (Paris: Musée Guimet, 2004), 95.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 This is a very conservative position within modernity shown among other texts by T. S. Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, various editions.
- 16 The pain of this childhood in the midst of war and then civil war hardly bears imagination by someone who did not experience it. For a detailed description see Xiao Qiongrui (Hsiao Chong-ray), *Liu Guosong Yanjiu* [A Study of Liu Kuo-sung] (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1996), 21-28.
- 17 See again Lang Shaojun, "Liu Guosong zai Dalu," 85.
- 18 His views as reported by "Tianyuue" in *Mingbao*, December 18, 1983.
- 19 See the articles by Wu Guanzhong in *Meishu* no. 5 (1979) and no. 9 (1980), and by the historian of Chinese Aesthetics, Liu Gangji in *Meishu* no. 5 (1982), which opened the debate on abstraction in China.
- 20 See "Tianyuue" in *Mingbao*, December 18, 1983.
- 21 Wu Guanzhong, "Zhuiqiu Tianqude huajia Liu Guosong" [Liu Guosong: A Painter In Pursuit of Natural Charm], *Xin Guancha* [New Observations] no. 3 (1983), also as "Xinde Qingchun" [New Youth], *Zhongguo Shibao* (*China Times*) (Taipei), March 27, 1983.
- 22 The chronology in Xiao Qiongrui, *Wuyue yu Dongfang—Zhongguo meishu xiandai hua yundong zai zhanhou Taiwan zhi fazhan* (1945-1970) [Fifth Moon and Ton Fan: The Development of the Modern Chinese Art Movement in Postwar Taiwan (1945-1970)] (Taichung: Tunghai University Press, 1991), 278-9, does not give the month of Liu Guosong's visit, his first return to the Chinese mainland since 1949. Another Taiwan-origin artist resident in Italy, Xiao Qin, was certainly in Beijing in June or July 1981 to visit his aunt Xiao Shufang, the painter wife of Wu Zuoren, since Xiao Shufang mentioned this fact to me when I visited her in August that year and remarked on the Taiwanese art materials on her table.
- 23 *Meizhou Huaqiao Ribao*, November 2, 1983. Present at his exhibition were Wu Zuoren, Huan Junwu, Liu Kaiqu, Ye Qianyu, Li Keran, Cai Ruohong, and from the literary world, Tu Linlin, and Ai Qing.
- 24 Xinhua News Agency report by Zhuo Peirong relayed in *Renmin Ribao*, December 2, 1983.
- 25 Lang Shaojun, "Liu Guosong zai Dalu."
- 26 *Guangzhou Ribao*, March 18, 1983.
- 27 Wu Guanzhong, *ibid.*
- 28 Jiang Xun, "Chouxiang biaoxian cong xifang dao dongfang" [Abstract Expressionism from West to East], *Lianhebao* (*United Daily News*) (Taiwan), August 11, 1996.
- 29 Pi Daojian, "Xiandai shuimohua shi zhong de Liu Guosong" [Liu Kuo-sung in the history of modern ink art], in *Xiandai bimo zhuanji* [Special Issue on Modern Brush and Ink], *Xiongshi Meishu* (*Lion Art Monthly*), no. 305 (1996).
- 30 It has curious resonance with some passages in the work of Zhao Wuji of the late 1960s.



*Sandstone Mountain in Tibet, 1987*

Ink and color on paper

59.61 × 26.50 in (151.4 × 67.3 cm)

Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei

### Early Encounters with the Theater

Whether by coincidence or destiny, Liu Kuo-sung's early life was intertwined with the theater. Under different circumstances, he might well have become an actor. He inherited the sonorous voice of his paternal grandfather, who was so celebrated for playing *xiaosheng* roles in Chinese opera that he was known simply as "Liu Xiaosheng" in his hometown of Yizhou, Shandong. Of his father Kuo-song has only vague memories, the most distinct of which is of their farewell at a theater in 1938, on the eve of the Battle of Wuhan. A regiment commander of the Kuomintang, the elder Liu had taken his six-year-old son to a play but soon hurried away to the battlefield, where he would perish. From then on Kuo-sung and his mother would lead a peripatetic existence across China with the Kuomintang's Rear Office.

Throughout his travails, the young Liu remained devoted to the theater. Officers of the Rear Office spent their free time teaching him Beijing opera arias. At school, Liu was also involved with stage productions based on contemporaneous events of the Sino-Japanese War. His stout build befitting the stereotypical

image of a Japanese soldier, Liu was assigned to play one, and in a moment of inflamed passions took a severe beating from the other students. After the crowd dispersed, Liu's mother came on stage and embraced her son in tears, making him promise never to act in a play again.

Indeed, apart from a few stints in the 1950's, Liu Kuo-sung rarely appeared on stage thereafter. But his interest in the theater never faded and only found other forms of expression. Liu entered the National Revolutionary Military Orphan School in 1948 and enlisted as a technician in the Kuomintang Marine Corps in the following year. After migrating to Taiwan with the Kuomintang, however, Liu learned that he had been assigned to the disposable rank-and-file. He objected to this by composing a passionate lyric based on *The Song of Righteousness (Zhengqi ge)* by the Song-dynasty literatus Wen Tianxiang (1236–1283), whose life story was frequently adapted for theater at the time. Subsequently, Liu enrolled in the Fine Arts Department of Taiwan Normal University. Dating from this period, *Memories of Childhood* (1957), which recollects Liu's early years in the mainland, renders many painted faces of Beijing Opera in the style of Matisse.

### Painting as Theater

The theatrical quality of Liu Kuo-sung's paintings is frequently noted by his friends and by sensitive critics alike.

Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guangzhong) observes that "His picture looks at once self-sufficient and incomplete because the vigor of its motion seems insatiable and threatens to break through the frame. The drama of his rhythmic movement lies in its display of the essence of Change."<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, Zhou Shaohua points out that "Liu Kuo-sung's theatrical artistic language consists of a fluidity in figuration, a superb control of color, thunderously audible imagery, and a compelling and energetic sense of movement."<sup>2</sup>

Even more explicitly, Peng De regards Liu's painting as painted theater: "Theater inheres readily in figure painting. By contrast, it is difficult for landscape painting to become theatrical, even less landscape painting without scenes and figures. Compared to veristic landscape paintings depicting precipitous mountains, Liu Kuo-sung's works are ambiguously poised between reality and unreality, landscape and non-landscape. It is thus even more difficult for them to approach theater. Liu uses paper with special textures and composes with unusual techniques in order to break our usual habits of viewing and to create a theater of visual perception. His shunning of clouds, bodies of water, trees, and rocks—the body and soul of traditional landscape painting—helps to create a theater of imaginary projection."<sup>3</sup>

There is no shortage of commentary on Liu Kuo-sung's painting, but it is rarely discussed within the conceptual framework of



**FIG 1** Liu Kuo-sung, *Memories of Childhood A*, 1957  
Oil on canvas, 28.15 × 23.62 in (71.5 × 60 cm)  
United Microelectronics Corporation (UMC), Taiwan

theatricality. The refreshing insights of Yu Kwang-chung, Zhou Shaohua, and Peng De are all based on the notion of painting as theater but are subtly different: Yu emphasizes rhythm and change; to this Zhou adds the synesthetic interfusion of image and sound; Peng focuses on the impact on habits of viewing. This divergence raises a methodological problem: as provocative and suggestive as the notion of “painting-as-theater” is, what exactly does it mean in the context of Liu Kuo-sung’s work?

“Theater” connotes ritualistic change, character transformation, and the climax and resolution of conflict. Moreover, traditional Chinese theater is founded on the notion of *yichang santan* (“one sings and three sigh,” or more loosely “one cry followed by three sighs”), which points to the salience of song, with its melody and rhythm, as opposed to speech. In its form and grammar, Chinese theater emphasizes *xieyi*, or the “sketching of ideas,” and the unfolding of characters’ inner worlds. As a counterexample, the subgenre of Nanxi (Southern Drama) evolved overly ornate and complex melodies that ultimately impeded performance. The point here is that Chinese theatricality does not depend on an actor’s embodied performance but rather on intangible resonances indirectly suggested by song. The “scene” in fact exists anywhere and everywhere—theater is nothing more than the act of making it visible to a viewer.



FIG 2 Fan Kuan (act. ca. 990–1030)  
*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, early 11th c.  
Ink and light colors on silk  
81.2 × 40.7 in (206.3 × 103.3 cm)  
Collection of National Palace Museum, Taipei

## Psychological Space / Mental Theater

Hence the allure of an interior theater that takes place in the mind, unbound by a physical stage or embodied performance.<sup>4</sup> The mental space of painting opens up a mental theater, which emphasizes a subjective on-stage presence. But *who* exactly is this subject? It is hybrid and nonspecific, and thus by definition accessible to anyone. In the analytical framework of “mental theater” proposed here, “the mind” and “theater” are inseparable and interdependent. Rather than considering the mind in futile abstraction, this framework regards it as both space and process. As space, the mind has stage presence; as process, it has a sense of temporality and transformation.

In the mental theater of painting, the character is the subject, and the medium is paper, ink, and other material forms. The radical transformation of Liu Kuo-sung’s painting style in the 1960s is often described as a turn from figuration towards abstraction. Stemming from Western art history, this familiar narrative does not accurately capture Liu’s particular situation in the 1950s and 60s. He strove to break free from two traditions: classical Chinese landscapes and “Eastern painting” (C: *dongyang hua*, J: *tōyō-ga*) innovated in modern Japan. Relative to mainstream Western painting prior to the 20th century, classical Chinese landscapes were already “abstract.” Abstraction in itself was not Liu’s goal.

Applying the modern vocabulary of point (*dian*), line (*xian*), and plane (*mian*) to the analysis of classical Chinese painting, Liu Kuo-sung believed that it was, on the whole, sophisticated in point and line but underdeveloped in plane. His frustration was relieved by an encounter with Fan Kuan’s (ca. 950–ca. 1030) *Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams* (Fig. 2), in which the precipitous central mountain presented precisely the planarity that Liu sought. Here Liu found a grandeur and majesty that was lost in later landscapes, as well as a singular aesthetic ideal that would persistently inspire his own practice. Accordingly, in his paintings Liu simplified and compressed the textures of mountain forms into large planes (Fig. 4). The formal relationship between points, lines, and planes is a foundational question of modern painting, but behind it lies more profound issues and challenges: how to create internal tension and visual drama in painting? How to tap into its inherent dynamics? The key to Liu Kuo-sung’s breakthrough of the 1960s was harnessing the tension between points and lines as motion and planes as stillness, which allowed him to stage dramas on a cosmic scale between rhythmic, gestural lines and monolithic planes.

It is instructive to consider Liu Kuo-sung’s reinvention of the Northern Song monumental landscape represented by Fan Kuan. The purpose of the monumental landscape tradition was not to picture mountains and bodies of water but rather to structure human emotions through their dynamic formations. What *Travelers Amid Mountains and Streams* pictures essentially is the interplay between motion and stillness. Somber and barren of vegetation, the autumn mountains inspire a keen awareness of the ineluctable passage of time and the vicissitudes of human history to which nature is indifferent. Yet water ceaselessly circulates through their monumental and immovable presence, by turns crashing as waterfalls and flowing as streams, providing a visual analogue to the viewer’s emotional journey from perturbation to calm.

Landscape painting as mental theater developed to an unprecedented level of sophistication in the middle of the Northern Song dynasty, as exemplified by *Solitary Temple Amid Clearing Peaks* (Fig. 3), traditionally attributed to Li Cheng.<sup>5</sup> Much like Fan Kuan’s work, this painting unfolds as mental theater in two acts. First,

crashing waterfalls and barren trees with gnarled "crab-claw" branches stir up an inner disturbance and melancholy. Second, emotions return to a state of tranquility with the flowing streams and gentle eddies. Behind the landscape is thus an expressive subject, or more precisely an expressive voice. Its transition from lamentation to relief provides the essential dramatic structure of the Northern Song monumental landscape, which came to be known at the time as "soundless poetry" (*wusheng shi*).<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of the Northern Song dynasty, this soundless poetry gradually dissipated. The autumnal scenery disappeared, leaving behind only the state of tranquility. In the longer history of Chinese painting, the mental theater of the Northern Song landscape would reemerge significantly only twice—during the tumultuous early Yuan (1271–1368) and early Qing (1644–1911) periods, each following the traumatic fall of a Han Chinese empire.



FIG 3 Li Cheng (919–967 C.E.)  
*A Solitary Temple Amid Clearing Peaks*, Northern Song Dynasty, 960–1127  
Hanging scroll, ink and slight color on silk, 44 x 22 in (111.8 x 55.9 cm)  
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri  
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 47-71. Photo courtesy Nelson-Atkins Media Services

Liu Kuo-sung was the ideal candidate to resurrect the Northern Song tradition for modern times. Forced by circumstance into rootless wandering as a child, he arrived in Taiwan with only faint impressions of home. In the 1950s, while studying art at National Taiwan Normal University, he visited the Alishan Range with his teachers and classmates. There he was inspired and determined not only to represent what he saw with his eyes but to capture the dreamlike landscapes of his longing.

From his very beginnings as an artist, Liu Kuo-sung concerned himself not only with the formal beauty of points, lines, and planes, but with the dynamic interrelations between motion and stillness. Distilling the mental theater of the Northern Song landscape, buried beneath centuries of representational and brushwork conventions, into abstract forms, Liu brought it to the forefront of painting and made its psychological and emotional



FIG 4 Liu Kuo-sung  
*Loftiness No. 4*, 1966  
Ink and color with collage on paper  
49.02 x 28.74 in (124.5 x 73 cm)  
Private Collection



FIG 5 Liu Kuo-sung, *Deep in the Verdant Twilight*, 1967

Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 22.64 × 37.01 in (57.5 × 94 cm). Private collection

tensions perceptible. The energetic marks executed with a *paibi* (a wide brush consisting of multiple heads mounted in a row) seem to channel certain repressed emotions. The static geometric forms contrast starkly with the agitated calligraphic brushwork (Figs. 4 and 5). Liu Kuo-sung's foremost artistic impulse during his formative years was to chant his own "soundless poetry" through landscape imagery, as evidenced by the frequent recurrence of songs and sounds in his titles:

*I Came Here to Listen to the Heavenly Speeches* (1960);  
*I Hear Your Voice, My Country* (1961); *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall* (1961); *The Season of Insect Songs* (1962); *Omnipresent Mountain Voice* (1968?); *Autumnal Gold* (1966).

The dynamic tensions between agitation and stillness in Liu's early works seem to reflect the turbulent events of the 1950s and early '60s—famines in mainland China, deadly typhoons and floods in Taiwan, and military strife between the Kuomintang and the Communists—as well as the painter's desire to sublimate his fraught emotional responses to them. In his personal life as well, Liu experienced momentous changes, including his marriage to the daughter of the headmaster of the Military Orphan School and the birth of their daughter soon thereafter.

### Echoes Beyond the Painting

Viewers of Liu Kuo-sung's works often remark on their sonic quality.<sup>7</sup> Responding to *Wintry Mountain Covered with Snow* of 1964 (Fig. 6), for example, Chu-tsing Li writes,

Instead of the feeling of perpetual movements as in the other paintings, this composition offers something different. All the moving, agitated, and rumbling forms in the foreground, from the lower left to the middle right, seem to lead gradually to a more stable, more permanent mountain peak on the upper left. The peak, with snow-like white streaks against dark masses, seems to be radiant in the light beyond. It seems as if all the agitation and strife below has finally been resolved in the high peak, a symbol of eternal harmony and unity.<sup>8</sup>

An art historian sensitive to the tradition of soundless poetry, Chu-tsing Li "hears" rumbles in the energetic forms of Liu's painting. This is not simply an instance of synesthetic association. The ink medium, which depends in part on the semi-accidents of liquid diffusion, possesses an inherent ineffable eloquence.<sup>9</sup> Manifested sonically, this eloquence is akin to the aforementioned theatrical ideal of "one sings and three sigh." Manifested visually, it inheres in the rhythmic variations in force, speed, tonality, and wetness in brushwork and inkwork. Because of this structural homology between sound and image, an ink painting is capable of evoking "echoes" beyond itself.

Ink painting exploited its sonic potential to the fullest extent in the early Qing period. Gong Xian (1618–1689) painted landscapes with a repetitive stippling action and inscribed them with the poetic couplet, "Inebriated, an old fisherman sings a song; charming performers of a professional troupe troll out of tune." (Figs. 7, 8). Here theater is more than a metaphor. The typical ink painter used relatively controlled lines for figuration and washes to inflect mood and feeling. Gong Xian, by contrast, did not observe



FIG 6 Liu Kuo-sung, *Wintry Mountain Covered in Snow*, 1964  
Hanging scroll; ink and light color on fibrous paper, with artist's signature and seal,  $33\frac{3}{8} \times 21\frac{5}{16}$  in ( $85.4 \times 55.8$  cm). Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, The Chu-tsing Li Collection, Gift of B U.K. Li in honor of Chu-tsing Li and in memory of Yao-wen Kwang Li and Teri Ho Li 2013.159

the conceptual distinction between line and wash, methodically layering dull and dry marks to create a mood of repressed melancholy. Having lived through the tumult of the late-Qing and early-Republican periods, Wu Changshuo (1844–1927) perhaps best understood Gong Xian, describing the latter's painting as follows: "[his] brushwork is nourished in its sparseness and tranquil in its profundity (*cangrun hunmu*), as if containing a melancholic feeling within for which it cannot find an outlet."<sup>10</sup> In a sense, Wu here voices the collective artistic aspirations of his generation of ink painters, whose works as a whole have been described as having "a tone of melancholy, depression, anguish, and resistance."<sup>11</sup> Wu Changshuo painted with carefree roughness and practiced abandon, a manner that he himself described as follows: "When painting trees, I ingest ink like a madman and spit out the rugged terrain [within my chest]"; "a fishbone lodged in my throat that I am relieved to spit out"; "to discharge the melancholy and bitterness within my chest."<sup>12</sup> Huang Binhong (1865–1955) was another spiritual successor to Gong Xian. Rejecting the conventional practices of his time, Huang marshalled concentrated ink into stark tonal contrasts to create scenes of brooding absorption, endowed with what he called "profound grandeur and nourished luxuriance" (*hunhou huazi*).<sup>13</sup> While Huang and Wu both exploited the "ineffable eloquence of the semi-accidental diffusion" specific to the ink medium as a means of expressing repressed feelings, their approaches differed.<sup>14</sup> A latecomer to painting, Wu Changshuo focused on floral subjects to avoid the technical challenges of landscapes.

The virtuosic Huang Binhong, on the other hand, was restricted to working at a small scale by his predominant use of centered-tip (*zhongfeng*) brushwork. Liu Kuo-sung was under no such constraints. Incorporating planar forms and working at a monumental scale, he channeled the majesty of Northern Song landscapes without relying on their codified texture strokes (*cunfa*).

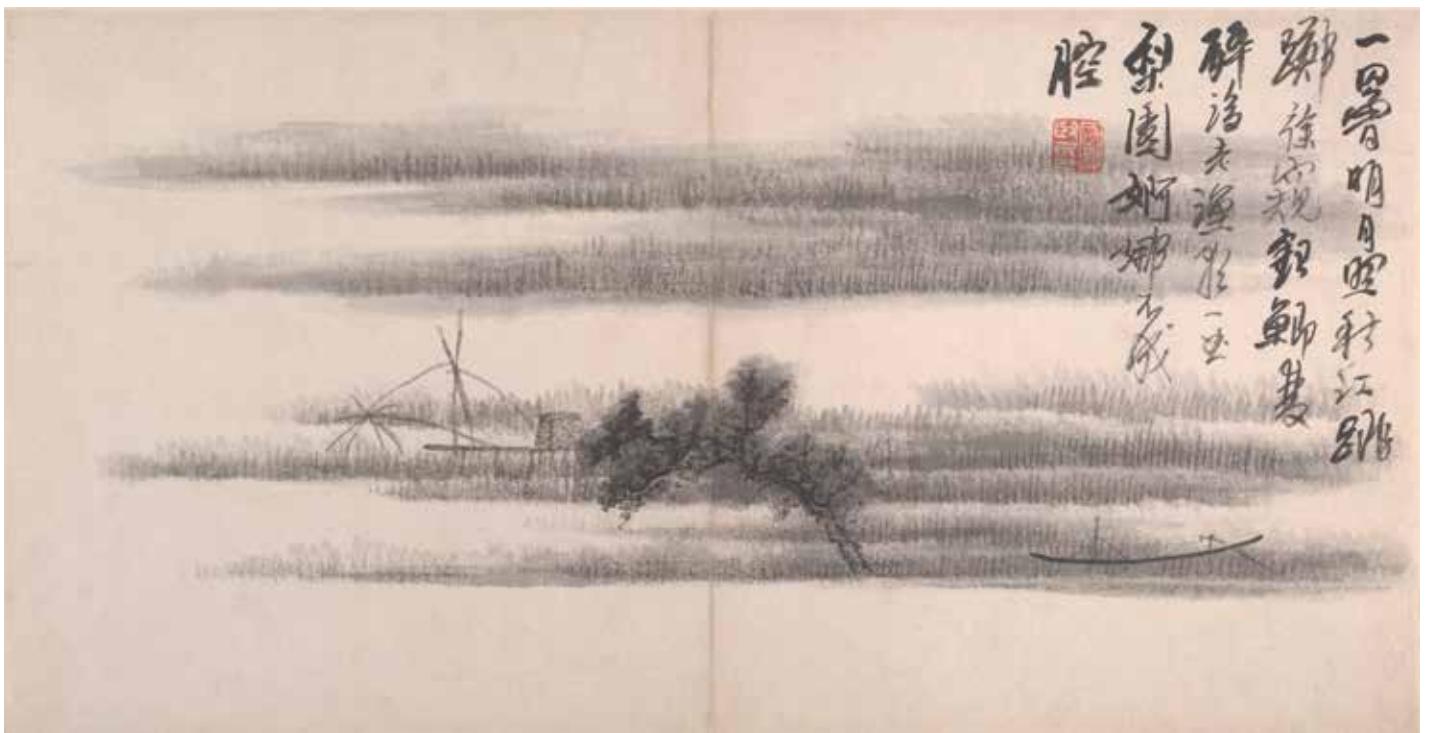


FIG 7 Gong Xian (1619–1689), *Landscape* (detail), datable 1682–88  
Album of six paintings; ink on paper, Each:  $8\frac{3}{4} \times 17\frac{3}{8}$  in. ( $22.2 \times 44.1$  cm)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Sackler Fund, 1969, 69.242.16–21



FIG 8 Gong Xian (1619–1689), *A Thousand Peaks and a Myriad Ravines*, Qing dynasty, ca. 1670  
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 24.41 × 40.16 in (62 × 102 cm). Museum Rietberg Zürich, gift of Charles A. Drenowitz, RCH 1172

### Locating Mental Theater

The lineage presented above of landscape-as-mental theater, from Gong Xian to Liu Kuo-sung, may appear linear and teleological, with each painter refining the work of his predecessor towards a preconceived goal. The reality is rather more complex: while Huang Binhong and Wu Changshuo self-consciously took Gong Xian as their model, the same cannot be said for Liu Kuo-sung. Yet it is difficult to deny the profound resonances between Gong's and Liu's landscapes in their evocation of mental theater through ineffable eloquence, a tension between repression and expression, and a mood of tranquil melancholy. These qualities constitute what Zhou Shaohua calls Liu's "theatrical artistic language."

Here the important question is: where is the mental theater of painting to be located? Operating in the terms of classical painting criticism, Wu Changshuo, as cited above, found in Gong Xian a repressed grievance and melancholy. Wu referred to his own painting as an act of "spitting out" "a fishbone lodged in my throat" and "the rugged terrain within my chest." Long before them both, the arch-literatus Su Shi (1037–1101) had theorized painting as an act of manifesting "bamboo [already] fully formed within one's chest" (*xiongyou chengzhu*). By contrast, Liu Kuo-sung rejects these images of interiority, explicitly in his writings and implicitly in his process. He approaches each composition as a game of *go*, beginning with specific partial images and responding to them as they develop organically. The mental theater of his painting does not reside in his mind but is rather an intersubjective phenomenon, as is clear in Chu-tsing Li's reaction to *Wintry Mountain Covered with Snow*. Li exclaimed to the painter, "The paths of development I had envisioned in my mind for Chinese painting—you've realized all of them already."<sup>15</sup> Here "you" and "I," "my mind" and "your painting" have fused as a composite medium. Without

Liu's snowscape, Li's mental picture may have remained inchoate; without Li's interpretation, Liu's snowscape may have remained unintelligible to art history.

Chu-tsing Li's interpretation of *Wintry Mountain* serves as a paradigmatic case of painting as mental theater. The rumbling tensions and strife at the bottom resolve into the silent, radiant peaks at the top. Exclusive to neither painter nor viewer, this drama occurs in their intersubjective encounter, enabled by a common set of cultural and historical references and aesthetic values.

We find traces of the "paths of development for Chinese painting" envisioned by Chu-tsing Li in his own art-historical scholarship. Li devoted his early career to Yuan-dynasty (1271–1368) painters, identifying deeply with their traumatic experience of dynastic change. He was drawn also to Gong Xian and especially his *Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines* (Fig. 8), describing it as "a rare masterpiece in world art history" and "one of the most powerful and dramatic expressions of Chinese art, a work that matches the tragic grandeur of such world masterpieces as Michelangelo's religious paintings and sculpture and Beethoven's symphonies."<sup>16</sup> Marking Gong Xian's transition from his "white mode" (*bai Gong*) to his "black mode" (*hei Gong*), *Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines* dates roughly from the decade of 1658–1668, which coincided with a harsh resurgence in the Qing dynasty's persecution of literati of the Jiangnan region. The repressed inarticulacy in Gong's new style befitted their collective mourning of the vicissitudes of history.

The mental theater of Gong Xian's painting became legible to Wu Changshuo during the tumult of the late Qing, and later to Chu-tsing Li, who recognized it as "one of the most powerful and dramatic expressions of Chinese art." A spiritual connection

was thus formed between Liu Kuo-sung, the rootless migrant who transmuted his dreamlike nostalgia for home into painting, and Chu-tsing Li, the art historian who had immersed himself in the melancholy inner worlds of the Yuan and early-Qing literati.

### Paintings of the Mind: The Evolution of "Rugged Terrain within the Chest"

A metaphor for repressed emotions in traditional Chinese aesthetics, the notion of a "rugged terrain within the chest" (*xiongzhong kuailei*) presupposes the painter's individual body as a virtual stage. By contrast, as I have argued above, the mental theater of painting exceeds the individual, and is at once a site of intersubjective connection and a consequence of the comingling of painter and medium. Liu Kuo-sung's process is semi-conscious and relies on the unpredictable effects of his materials, including the pooling of ink in his "water rubbing" (*shuituo*) technique and ink's diffusion in his custom-made, fibrous paper. The painter's mind manifests itself in and through his materials. To the extent that the materials are self-actualizing, the mind is no longer merely a "rugged terrain within the chest" but a medium of its own—between subject and material, and between one subject and another.

*Moonlit Landscape* (Fig. 9), for example, evokes a river journey towards an imaginary realm. As Jason Wang observes, in works such as *The Singing and Weeping Waterfall; Red Cliffs* (1961); and *Lofty Mount Lu* (1961), the ink medium at Liu's hands manifests "a fluid state that is structurally ambiguous and devoid of brushwork, in which composition verges on disappearing," or an "amorphous, abstract fluid form." This fluidity evokes in the viewer a sense of "a snow-covered landmass gradually dissolving" or "a landscape left in ruins after a scorching by Zhu Rong, the God of Fire." Liu Kuo-sung's *I Hear Your Voice, My Country* "appears as a landscape that has been dissolved, transformed, and completely stripped of any concrete form." The "unsettling fluidity" that the viewer experiences evokes "a home that is inaccessible to first-hand experience and thus is difficult to capture through formal representation. Here 'home' becomes a fluid, transformed, ungraspable entity that exists only as an idea.... Home can be heard, but it cannot be seen." "In these unsettled and dissolving landscapes, Liu Kuo-sung is likely betraying his longing for home."<sup>17</sup>

Jason Wang's discussion, paraphrased above, considers the rich inner worlds of Liu Kuo-sung's art synchronically. Considered diachronically, Liu's art evolved in distinct phases: over time, his memories have inspired new aesthetic interests, and his new experiences have generated formal possibilities for the commingling of the painter's subjectivity and his medium. The mental and formal dimensions of Liu's stylistic evolution are intertwined.

In his illuminating periodization of Liu Kuo-sung's artistic evolution, Huang Hai-Ming focuses on Liu's treatment of planes, again for the painter the most important of the three pictorial elements.<sup>18</sup> Huang's purpose is not simply to write a history of form and style, but more importantly to reveal their psychological and emotional motivation. What truly concerns Huang is the viewer's subjective experience of planarity in Liu's landscapes, which are at times capacious and open and at times oppressive and suffocating. The alternation between the poles of closedness and openness correlates with a certain ambivalence. Appearing as walls, windows, or ambiguous obstructions, by turns solid and translucent, Liu's planes tend to demarcate a division between

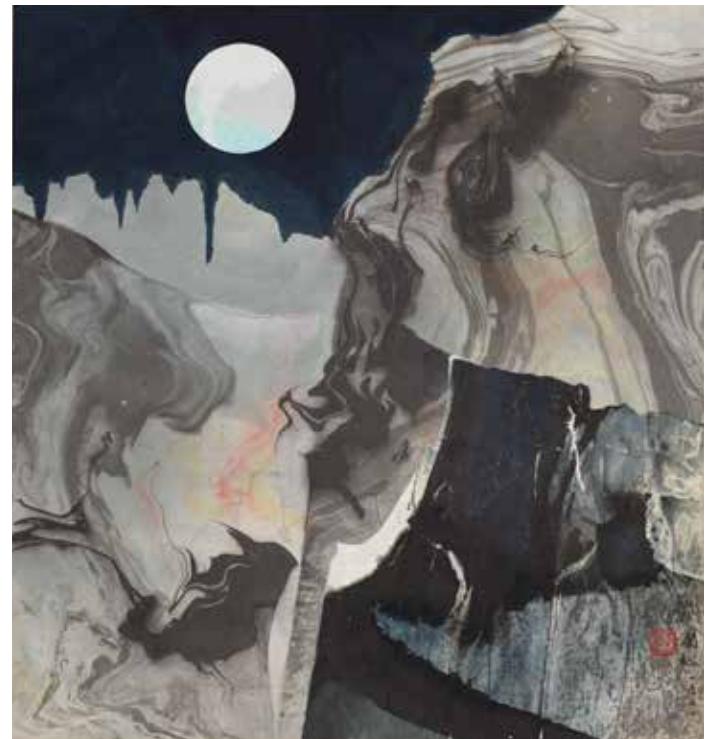


FIG 9 Liu Kuo-sung, *Moonlit Landscape*, 1971

Ink, color, and collage on paper, 17<sup>15/16</sup> x 16<sup>1/8</sup> in (45.5 x 42.9 cm)  
Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, The Chu-tsing Li Collection,  
Gift of B.U.K. Li in memory of Chu-tsing Li, Yao-wen Kwang Li, and Teri Ho Li 2016.234

two worlds. At the same time, in their obduracy they are analogous to the "rugged terrain within the chest." Huang Hai-Ming's periodization of Liu's mature style is summarized below:

Stage one dates to circa 1960 and is represented by such works as *If Heaven Were Sentimental, Heaven Too Will Become Aged* (1959), *I Came Here to Listen to the Heavenly Speeches* (1960), and *Touring Taroko at Night* (1962). The key motifs of this stage are "walls with patterns but without boundaries" and "boundless walls that oppress the viewer."

Stage two dates to the first half of the 1960s and is represented by such works as *Dance of the Image of Ink* (1963), *Omnipresent Mountain Voice, Impenetrable* (1965), *A Grassy Gully in Late Spring* (1966). The key motif of this stage is a rugged terrain that evokes a repressed melancholy. In the typical narrative of these works, vapors cycle amidst heaven and earth, suggesting unsettled emotions, and express themselves in energetic, calligraphic lines. They are then absorbed into the marble-like textures left by fibers that Liu manually removes from his custom-made paper (Figs. 4, 5) in a process that he calls "plucked tendons, stripped skin" (*choujin bopi*).

Stage three dates to the latter half of the 1960s and is represented by such works as *Inside and Outside the Window No. 3* (1967), *Mid-Autumn Festival* (1969), *Moon Walk* (1969) (Fig. 10), and *Blue Moon* (1970). These works often feature window-like motifs, created by collage, that set up a division between an interior world of "abstract calligraphic lines coagulating into landscape forms" and an exterior one, "beyond the window, of 'naturalistic' landscapes simulated in water-rubbing and other techniques. Within and without the window, the two worlds are connected and yet unreachably distant."

Stage four dates to the 1970s and is represented by such works as *A Moon for All Seasons III* (1971), *Rising Sun No. 3* (1972), and

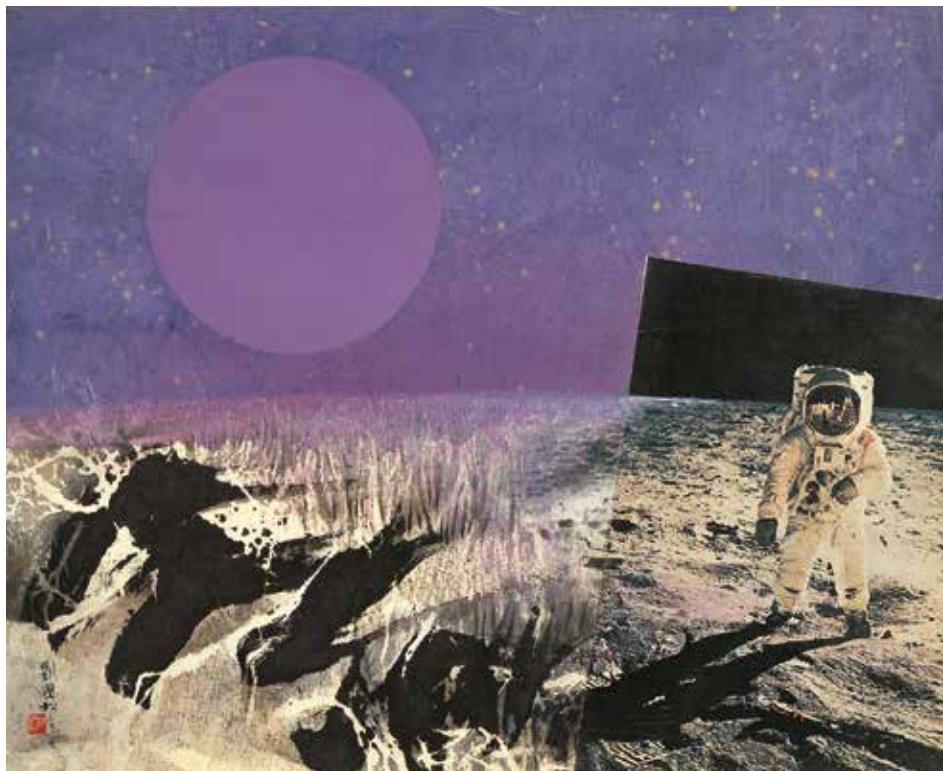


FIG 10 Liu Kuo-sung, *Moon Walk*, 1969  
Ink and color on paper, 27.17 × 33.46 in (69 × 85 cm)  
Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan



FIG 11 Liu Kuo-sung, *Moon on Snowy Mountains*, 1970  
Vertical wall scroll; ink, color, metallic paint, and collage on paper, 35 × 23.31 in (88.9 × 59.2 cm)  
Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum



FIG 12 Liu Kuo-sung, *Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles*, 1985  
Ink and color on paper, 15.75 × 10.43 in (40 × 26.5 cm)  
Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection, England

*A Pointed Ring* (1973). Works from this period are distinguished primarily by the disappearance of the obstructing planes seen in earlier works. Their dominating motifs are celestial bodies that circulate between light and dark, cold and warmth (Figs. 10, 12).

Stage five dates to the 1980s and is represented by such works as *Heaven Lake* (1982), *White Snow is White* (1982), *Mountain Light Blown into Wrinkles* (1985) (Fig. 13), *Flowing Water Comes Constantly From the Fountain Head* (1985), *Eternal Rivers and Myriad Mountains* (1985), *The Midnight Sun* (1985), and *Origin of Life No.2* (1985). In these works Liu Kuo-sung returns from space to earth, paying keen attention to geological textures and hydraulic patterns that appear animated by a vital force (Fig. 13).

Stage six begins in 1987 but develops most fully after 1990. It is represented by such works as *The Change of Lotus* (1988), *Variations on Mountains and Rocks* (1988), *A Reconstructed Landscape* (1989), *Rays of Morning Sunshine* (1991), *Free Spirit* (1992), *Spring Swallows* (1992), *Dusk Colors on a Glass Window* (1993), *Autumnal Sounds Outside my Window, Dreams Within* (1995), *The Early Universe* (1999), and *Skyscraper of Art* (1999). Works of this period are characterized by the disappearance of landscape and of the former coherent sense of planarity. Planes are instead reconfigured as geometric constructs in architectonic spaces.

Huang Hai-Ming's periodization implies a narrative of psychological and emotional evolution. A theme emerges in his discussion that he does not state explicitly: the dialectical relationship between two spatiotemporal worlds in Liu's art as symbolized by

planes. At first distant and mutually unreachable, the two worlds gradually approach and ultimately fuse into a new plane. From the penetration and breaking down of walls, to the gazing across two sides of windows, to the expansion and sublimination of vision—the dynamic relations of Liu's planes pulsate with a certain emotional rhythm. It is perhaps wise that Huang does not link this rhythm directly to the painter's sense of rootlessness and nostalgia for home, as this leaves open other avenues of identification and interpretation. Indeed, other forces impinged on Liu's art, including the reexamination of the essential meaning of life due to Existentialist thought, the listlessness and aspiration of Taiwanese youths in the 1960s, and the expansion of human imagination made possible by Space Age exploration. Beginning in the 1980s, Liu Kuo-sung returned frequently to mainland China, inspiring a fervent following among young Chinese artists, who saw in his fugitive landscapes not only new formal possibilities but also a potent metaphor for the thawing of Mao-era ideologies. The appeal of Liu Kuo-sung's art, then and now, lies in its evocation of a mental theater that resonates with the cultural and historical dialectics of each generation.

(Translation by Alan C. Yeung)

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## Notes

1 Yu Kwang-chung, "Nature Proposes, Art Disposes—The Metaphysical Landscape of Liu Kuo-sung," *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities* 1 (April 1993): 171-178. [This essay is also reproduced in this Reader, 131-133.]

2 Zhou Shaohua, *Liu Guosong de yishu goucheng* [The Construction of Liu Kuo-sung's Art] (Wuhan: Hubei meishu chuban she, 1985), 28.

3 Peng De, "Liu Guosong de wuren zhijìng" [The Uninhabited Realms of Liu Kuo-sung], in *Zhongguo huihua mingjia ge'an yanjiu: Liu Guosong* [Case Studies in Masters of Chinese Painting: Liu Kuo-sung], vol. 2, ed. Mei Mosheng (Hong Kong: Wholly Friendship Bookstore, 2013), 140.

4 The ink painter Fang Shi (b. 1963), whose practice was inspired by Liu Kuo-sung, describes "psychological space" (*xinli kongjian*) thus:

The straightforward manipulation of visual effects and the use of highly formalized geometric shapes—a purer kind of symbols that are full of dynamism—are my way of manifesting a mental image (*xinxiang*). I should say that my arrangement of these "symbols," particularly in the relationship between black and white, began as a kind of direct confirmation of pictorial effects. Later, the symbols became part of my search for formal solutions that were closer to the mind, and my attempt to generate a mysterious space that would reflect my subjective confusions about reality and reflections on my existential condition. Precisely because of this, when I connected these symbols with "psychological space," I strove to emphasize and clarify the abstractness of my pictures.

See his essay "Lifang dunyuan xilie" [The Escaping Square, Fleeing Circle Series], in *Ershiyi shiji Zhongguo xin shuimo yishujia congshu 1: Fang Shi* [The Twenty-first Chinese New Ink Artist Series: Fang Shi] (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu shuban she, 2000), 51.

5 Mistakenly attributed to Li Cheng for much of history, this painting in fact dates from the mid Song dynasty.

6 See Wang Yuejin (Eugene Y. Wang), "Luanshan cang gusi: Qingluan xiaosi tu yu Beisong shihua husue xinyi" [An Ancient Temple Hidden within a Chaotic Landscape: A New Interpretation of Solitary Temple Amidst Clearing Peaks and the Interplay of Poetry and Painting in the Northern Song], in *Hanmo huicui—Xidu Meiguo cang Zhongguo Wudai Song Yuan shuhua zhenpin* (Masterpieces of Early Chinese Painting and Calligraphy in American Collections), ed. Shanghai Museum (Beijing: Peking University Press), 154-169.

7 Hsiao Chong-ray (Xiao Qiongrui), "Cong shenyun, kongling dao chenshi: Liu Guosong xiandai shuimo de yinyue xing" [From Spiritual Resonance and Ethereal Emptiness to Weighty Substance: The Musicality of Liu Kuo-sung's Modern Ink Art], in *Cangqiong zhi yun: Liu Guosong shuimo yishu* [Harmonies of the Sky: Liu Kuo-sung's Ink Art] (Beijing: Shanyishu wenjiao jijinhui, 2016), 86-95. On

"echoes beyond the painting," see also Bai Wei, *Yishu qipa—Qi Baishi* [Qi Baishi: An Artistic Prodigy] (Lanzhou: Lanzhou daxue chuban she, 1996), 133.

8 Chu-tsing Li, *Liu Kuo-sung: The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist*, Taipei: National Gallery of Art and Museum of History, 1969, 35.

9 Pi Daojian, "Xiandai shuimohua shi zhong de Liu Guosong" [Liu Kuo-sung in the history of modern ink art], in *Xiandai bimo zhuanji* [An anthology on modern brush and ink], ed. Esula Tuoyika (Ursula Toyka) (Zhuhai: Zhuhai chuban she, 2007), 31.

10 Shan Guoqiang, ed., *Gugong bowuyuan cang wenwu zhenpin quanji* [Complete Collection of the Treasures of the Palace Museum: Paintings by Masters of the Jinling School] (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1997), 137.

11 Zheng Zhenduo, "Jin bainian lai Zhongguo huihua de fazhan" [The Development of Chinese Painting over the Past Century] in *Zheng Zhengduo yishu kaogu wenji* [Collected Essays on Art and Archaeology] by Zheng Zhenduo, ed. Zheng Erkang (Beijing: Wenwu chuban she, 1988), 188.

12 Shui Tianzhong and Liu Xilin, *20 shiji Zhongguo zhuming huajia zongying* [Stories of Masters of 20th-Century Chinese Painting] (Qingdao: Qingdao chuban she, 1992), 8-9.

13 See the entry for the year 1923 in Wang Zhongxiu, *Huang Bin Hong nianpu* [A Chronology of Huang Bin Hong], expanded edition (Beijing: Rongbaozhai chuban she, 2013).

14 Pi Daojian, op. cit.

15 Chen Lusheng, *Liu Guosong pingzhuhan* [Critical Biography of Liu Kuo-sung] (Nanning: Guangxi meishu chuban she, 1996), 272.

16 Quoted in Helmut Brinker, "The Masterpiece: A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines by Gong Xian (ca. 1617-1689)," 2003, [http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5808/1/Brinker\\_Masterpiece\\_20.7.pdf](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5808/1/Brinker_Masterpiece_20.7.pdf).

17 Wang Jiaji (Chia Chi Jason Wang), "Lun Liu Guosong 1961 nian huigui shuimo shanshui zhi lu" [On Liu Kuo-sung's 1961 Return to Ink Landscape Painting], in *Zhongguo huihua mingjia ge'an yanjiu: Liu Guosong*, op. cit., 146-149. [Translated in this Reader, 162-167.]

18 Huang Hai-Ming (Huang Haiming), "21 shiji kan Liu Guosong—Liu Guosong xin chuautong shuimohua chunagzuo lingtan: cong zaixian xitong zhong geli yu butongming jiemian liangduan cunzai duihua de guadian chufa" [Considering Liu Kuo-sung in the 21st century—A New View on Liu Kuo-sung's Neo-Traditional Ink Painting: From the Perspective of Dialogues between Two Sides of Planes of Isolation and Opacity in the System of Representation], in *Zhongguo huihua mingjia ge'an yanjiu: Liu Guosong*, 152-158.

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## COLOPHON



Liu Kuo-sung and his wife Li Mohua seated in front of his paintings, 1961

THE LIU KUO-SUNG READER  
Selected Texts on and by the Artist, 1950s–Present

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FRONT COVER:

Liu Kuo-sung (b. 1932)

*Towards Mysterious Whiteness*, 1963

Ink and color on paper

37.01 x 22.83 in (94 x 58 cm)

Collection of Johnson Chang Tsong-Zung

BACK COVER:

Liu Kuo-sung in his Taiwan studio, 2021

Photography by Hsu Pei-Hung

PAGE 1:

Liu Kuo-sung, *Moon Walk*, 1969

Ink and color on paper

27.17 x 33.46 in (69 x 85 cm)

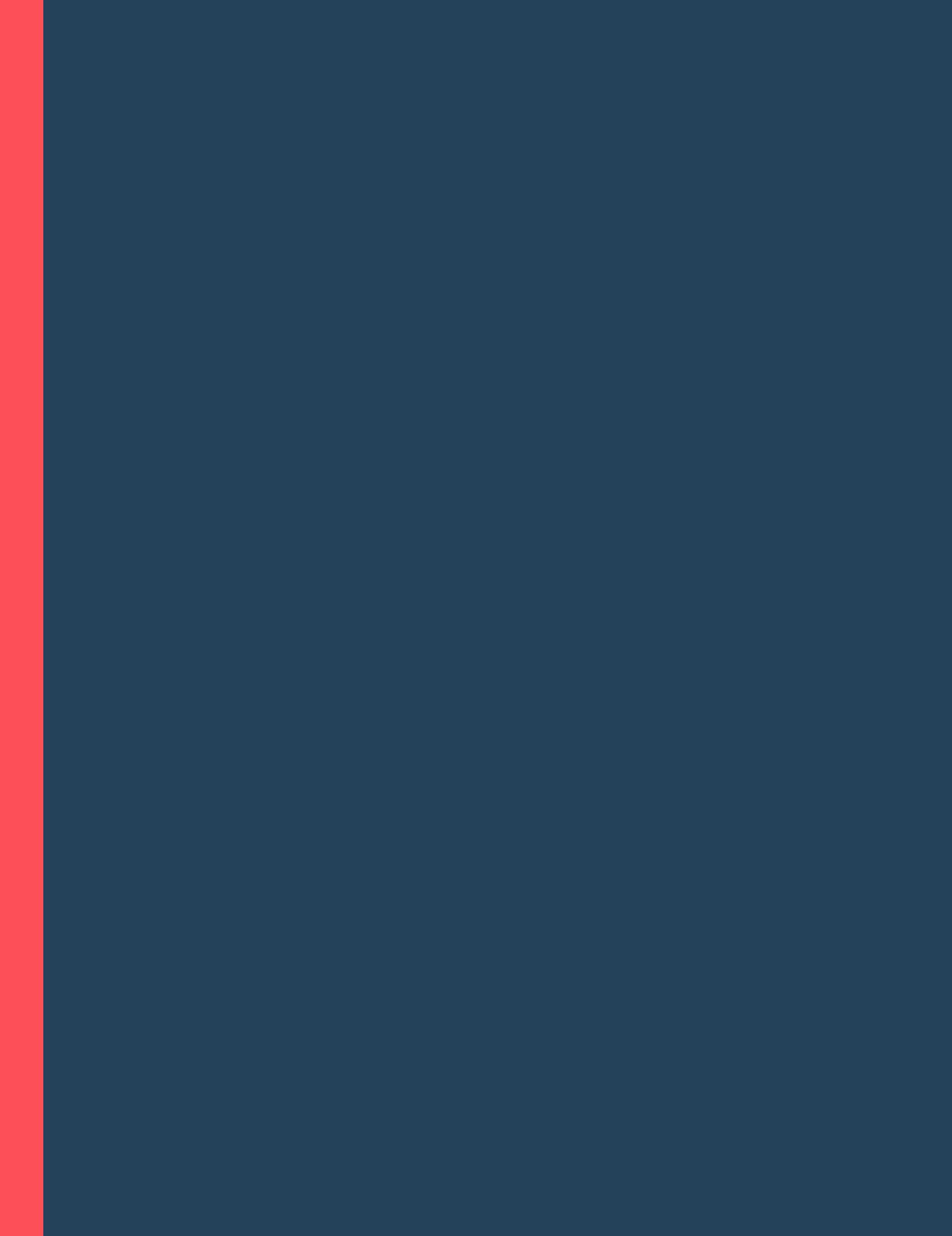
Collection of Roy HSU, Taiwan

PAGE 2: Liu Kuo-sung painting in his dormitory, Taipei, 1965

PAGE 257: Liu Kuo-sung, circa 1966

The images of Liu Kuo-sung featured on pp. 3, 9, 10 and 257 of this Reader are film stills provided courtesy of Harvard CAMLab from its in-process feature-length film *To The Moon*, based on the art and life of Liu Kuo-sung (projected release in 2022).

Unless otherwise specified, all images of artworks by Liu Kuo-sung and all documentary photographs featured in *The Liu Kuo-sung Reader* are courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation.





**Liu Kuo-sung** (b. 1932) is a world-renowned painter and the preeminent practitioner, theorist, and educator of the Modern Ink medium. In his long career, he has influenced generations of artists and shaped the histories of modern and contemporary art in the Chinese-speaking sphere and beyond. This richly illustrated Reader presents a selection of texts on and by Liu dating from the 1950s onward, including manifestos, memoirs, reviews, journalism, intellectual debates, as well as art-historical scholarship. Dynamically juxtaposed, the texts chart the development and reception of Liu's work and thought across key contexts—from his youth in mainland China during the Sino-Japanese War, to his rise to prominence in the complex art scene of postwar Taiwan, to his reconnection with the mainland during its liberalization of the 1980s and 90s. Through confluences of text and image, the Reader offers vivid case studies in issues of art and culture equally resonant today: the meaning of tradition, the politics of art-making, and the dynamics of creative freedom.

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