

A Master's Ethereal Visions, Inspired by East and West

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Li draws on an age-old tradition while taking it to a new stage.

(LONDON)The art of Li Huayi on view at Eskenazi until Nov. 30 is one of those miracles one hopes for without really believing that they can happen.

That a Chinese painter born in 1948 to a wealthy Shanghai family who lived through the Cultural Revolution came out unscathed is astonishing enough. But that he should have become a master of unparalleled magnitude who draws on the age-old tradition of the Chinese literati while taking it to an entirely new stage, is truly astounding.

This is the first time that Li's work is displayed in Europe. The exhibition of 20 paintings in ink and color on paper, all but one of which were done in 2006 and 2007, is bound to be remembered as a historic landmark.

Gazing at "Peaks at Dusk" — in which unreal mountains rise out of the oncoming darkness into a glaring light that engulfs the rocky walls — many will feel uplifted by this lyrical hymn to the world. Painting this picture took the better part of eight weeks. It was finished by early July 2006.

The lightness of the touches with the applied tip of the brush in nuances of gray and black, enhanced with pale hues, and the rendition of the tiny pine trees poised on the crest lines bear witness to the admiration that Li Huayi professes for the Northern Song masters of the 11th and 12th centuries — the landscape shares that ethereal quality of beautiful things remembered from a dream.

Yet, looked at more carefully, neither this landscape nor the others resemble the art of the Song dynasty.

Even when Li Huayi paints small-format fan-shaped landscapes meant to hark back to the Song past, the spirit betrays a different aesthetic perception as well as a very different way of wielding the brush.

In "Thatched Pavilion by Moonlight," an album leaf done this year, the tree that springs in the foreground is perfectly Chinese. However, the very idea of a tree rising from the lower frame of the composition as well as the mountain wall blocking out the right-hand side point to the artist's long exposure to Western-style painting. Even the tiny moon disk painted a pale yellow right at the top betrays reminiscences of Western art.

In "Dark Mountain with Russet Trees" of 2003, one of the large-size landscapes (and the only one done before 2006), the composition is faintly reminiscent of Serge Poliakoff's abstract constructions. It somehow suggests awareness of Western art even though one would be hard put to be specific.

In most cases, it is indeed impossible to point to any definite source. While the landscapes are

unquestionably Chinese in spirit, the composition, the finer detail, and the handling of light that has no precedent in China, define an entirely novel art.

The explanation is to be found in Li's own story. He was only 6 when he became attracted to calligraphy and painting, which he studied with Wang Jimei, the son of a famous Shanghai school painter, Wang Zhen. With adolescence came the urge for radical change. At 16, Li turned to Zhang Chongren, trained in Brussels as a Western-style artist of the brand approved by the Royal Academy of Belgium. This was to prove a life-saving device.

Within two years, the Cultural Revolution swept across China. Thanks to his training, Li was able to support himself by designing the posters in the primitive Realist style that the regime propagandists required, until Mao's death in 1976 at long last signaled the end of the upheaval.

During those turbulent years, the idea of becoming an artist, with which he had occasionally toyed in his youth, firmly took hold of the poster designer's mind. Once the Cultural Revolution was over, Li, fed up with the crude realism that had been forced on him, set out in search of artistic inspiration, guided by instinct and distant memories.

In keeping with time-honored tradition among Chinese literati taking up painting, Li traveled to see beautiful scenery, in particular the Huangshan mountains in Anhui Province. He took a deep interest in Buddhism, which had inspired some of the greatest schools of early Chinese art, and visited the Dunhuang caves covered with murals, mostly from the 7th to the 9th centuries. A painting of the Buddhist Guanyin, done by Li under the spell of the Dunhuang frescoes is illustrated in the exhibition book. While it reveals the skills of a talented draftsman, it borders on Revivalist kitsch.

In 1982, the painter made a move that could have put an end to his efforts to reconnect with the Chinese past. He left for America with his wife and settled in San Francisco. The artist-in-the-making attended courses at the Academy of Art where he obtained a master's degree. But neither Realism in any form nor the various abstract experiments in which he dabbled greatly appealed to Li. What really fascinated him was his compatriot Zhang Daqian's work, with its mix of Chinese heritage and Western influences, particularly those of German Expressionism and Abstractionism. Li began to practice Zhang's splash ink technique, as Michael Knight, a curator at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, observes in his introduction to the exhibition book. In a one-man show at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California, the artist's Dunhuang-style paintings and his Abstract Expressionist works were seen hanging together as if the painter suffered from artistic schizophrenia.

It took Li a decade to change direction. One day, spilling ink across a horizontal scroll, he spread it with a brush. Somehow, a view emerged, rather unreal, with tree trunks and mountain sides that do not quite hang together. Slowly, Li worked his way back to landscape painting, edging all along toward Chinese tradition and eventually linking up with it, as may be seen in his first truly great work, "Rock

Face with Windswept Pines," done in 1995.

Arnold Chang, a collector who lent the work to Li's one-man show at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, wrote in the catalogue about the combination of the "Northern Song sense of monumentality" and the "Southern Song sense of intimacy." Commenting on the "areas of volume and concavity" often in the reverse of what the viewer would expect, Chang (who is also a painter) mused: "As an artist, I find myself thinking, 'How did he do that?' "

Between 1992 and 1996, Li completed only 16 paintings. Then, as if a spring had been released, his first breathtaking masterpieces saw the light of day. A landscape done in the years 1997-99 depicts a dark peak, rising straight up against a backdrop of hazy, higher peaks with a waterfall.

In 1997-98, Li followed this up with a fantastic horizontal scroll inspired by Du Fu, a famous Tang poet who wrote an ode about the drizzle falling over the river, the trees and the grass.

The tradition that kept haunting him was that of the Northern Song school. The artist said in an interview that he only saw his first Northern Song painting in 1978. It was Fan Kuan's scene under snow in the Beijing Palace Museum. In 1989, Li was able to travel to Taiwan and visit the National Palace Museum in Taipei, where much of the Imperial collection of China is stored. "Early Spring" by Guo Xi left an indelible impression on his mind. Astonishingly, Li rediscovered for himself the Chinese ink and brush technique without ever studying it under a master.

These days, the painter travels to China, sometimes for weeks, to gaze at the scenery and always returns to his San Francisco studio to paint in peace, uninterrupted by visitors calling on a man whose fame is spreading fast. Last year, the ultimate accolade was bestowed upon him by Chen Pei Qiu, a renowned Shanghai scholar and connoisseur of Chinese masters consulted by leading museums. The grand old lady, now 86, formally accepted him as a disciple.

Soon, the Chinese master who reconnected with the East while living in the West will stand out as the towering genius of 21st-century art. As a grand overture to the Asian Art week in London, which opened on Thursday, it would be hard to better the Eskenazi show.

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