

Li Huayi: Recent Works

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One of the most innovative of contemporary Chinese ink painters, Li Huayi came to public attention in 1992, when he first created works in his mature style. Since then, his paintings have gained world renown through one man exhibitions¹ and through representation in group shows of modern and contemporary Chinese paintings.² This exhibition showcases Li Huayi's most recent works – works done in 2007, 2008, and 2009 that reveal the new directions in which he has taken his art.

Brief biography

Li Huayi was born in Shanghai in 1948. He studied art privately, learning traditional ink painting from Wang Jimei, beginning at age six. In 1964, at age sixteen, he began his study of Western art with Zhang Chongren, who had studied at the Belgian Royal Academy in Brussels and who was known for his realistic watercolors. Although many Chinese of all ages, including the young, were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), Li Huayi was allowed to remain in Shanghai to paint Soviet-style propaganda murals, thanks to his dexterity with brush and ink and his excellent training in Western art.

Late in the 1970s, after the Cultural Revolution wound down and travel restrictions were eased. Li Huayi visited a number of China's important scenic, historic, and cultural sites, including Huangshan, in Anhui province. Many of his later paintings, including those in the current exhibition, depict those celebrated peaks. Li taught himself about the early history of Chinese painting and achieved an understanding of religious painting through informal study of the Buddhist cave temples at Dunhuang in Gansu province. He also frequently traveled to Beijing to take in exhibitions. In 1978, for example, he saw his first Northern Song landscape painting there and his first major exhibition of modern Western art; both made a deep and lasting impression on him.

In 1982, Li Huayi and his wife immigrated to San Francisco. He enrolled in San Francisco's Academy of Art University, studying Western art and completing a master's degree in 1984. He experimented with various styles of painting in the 1980s, gradually creating his signature style in the early 1990s; that style, with grand mountains filling his compositions, recalls the monumental landscapes of the Northern Song period.

What is contemporary Chinese ink painting?

On first encountering contemporary Chinese ink paintings, Western viewers—indeed, even some Asian viewers — occasionally ask why a contemporary Chinese artist such as Li Huayi would continue to paint with brush and ink rather than adopting contemporary Western styles and working in an international mode, the underlying assumption being that "contemporary works" should be Western in style: they should relate to contemporary works being produced in other cultures, namely American or Western European cultures. But that assumption is flawed, as there is no inherent reason that globalization, or internationalism, should necessitate the grafting of the artistic tradition of one culture onto that of another culture. We do not expect citizens of China to give up speaking Chinese in favor of, say, English, for example; in like manner, we should not expect Chinese artists and collectors to give up centuries-old artistic preferences in favor of Western styles with but several decades of history. Although some native speakers of Chinese are entirely fluent in English, they still generally speak Chinese; in like manner many Chinese artists may be skilled in painting in Western styles but they still choose to work in Chinese modes.

Turning this thought around, should China one day become the world's dominant political, economic, military, and artistic power — some would say “when China one day becomes the world's superpower” — we would not expect Western artists immediately to abandon Western artistic styles in order to master Chinese ink painting any more than we would expect Americans to begin speaking Chinese rather than English as their native language. In that context, it should come as no surprise that many Chinese artists, whether working in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or the West, choose to work within a traditional Chinese framework, their challenge being not to perpetuate an old style, let alone to adopt a new, foreign one, but to revitalize the traditional idiom by injecting a contemporary note. In fact, that is a far more difficult challenge than simply to perpetuate an old style or to adopt a foreign style as one's own.

The persistence of a distinguished tradition compels many contemporary Chinese painters to adhere to classical subjects, formats, and materials. With origins traceable to Neolithic times(c. 6000 - c.1600 BC), traditional Chinese painting claims a continuous line of development , first emphasizing verisimilitude and culminating in the monumental landscapes of the Song dynasty (960 - 1279) and then focusing on the abstract, expressionistic landscapes favored by the literati during the Yuan (1279 - 1368), Ming (1368 - 1644), and Qing (1644 - 1911) dynasties.

By the Northern Song period (960 - 1127), the landscape had emerged as the pre-eminent subject

of Chinese painting, a place it holds even today, as demonstrated by the works of Li Huayi and his fellow contemporary Chinese ink painters. Landscape paintings typically feature towering mountains, tumbling waterfalls, and rushing streams, the mountains characteristically enveloped in mist; indeed, the Chinese word for "landscape" is shanshui, which can be translated literally as "mountains and water." The interest in real and painted landscapes reflects the philosophical search for the principles that underlie the unity and harmony of nature, a search intricately linked to Daoism. In that context, the landscape perfectly embodies yin and yang – the female and male forces of nature – the mountains symbolizing the yang forces and the water the yin; moreover, the landscape also represents the proper balancing of those forces, the downward movement of the waterfalls complementing the upward thrust of the mountains, for example.

Beginning in the Northern Song period and coming fully to the fore in the Yuan, the Chinese embraced the literati, or scholar-amateur ideal. The literati earned their livelihood through government service, writing, or teaching but turned to painting and calligraphy for relaxation and personal enjoyment. They drew inspiration from literary classics and from the scrolls they collected, so that their works of art contained countless references to literary, historical, and artistic legacies, calling to mind specific artists, styles, and even modes of brushwork. At the same time, their paintings came to serve as vehicles for the expression of their ideas, and personalities. These exceptionally accomplished artists recognized the expressive value of formal elements – line, texture, brushwork, and color – prizing those qualities for their own sake and working in deceptively simple styles of painting. They sought to capture the idea, or essence, of a subject rather than its mere outward appearance and to create in their works a fusion of poetry, painting, and calligraphy. With their base in abstraction and with their numerous literary and artistic references, such paintings might be considered the first, tentative experiments in post-modernism.

By the late nineteenth century, however, the Chinese painting tradition had become so enmeshed in its past, with sanctioned styles and codified brushwork, that its practice held little appeal. In the early twentieth century, many young painters were thus only too eager to explore Western styles. To expand their knowledge of Western learning, some traveled abroad to study at Europe's leading art academies; those who stayed home avidly perused the illustrated art journals then beginning to circulate in China. At the same time, many Western painters coincidentally were looking to Asia for inspiration with which to revitalize a tradition they considered moribund.³

In fact, Chinese students of all academic disciplines began to travel abroad at this time, and thus

initiated a period of profound intellectual ferment, with probing questions asked about science, medicine, government policy, foreign relations, and new directions for national development. China experienced a drive to modernize - to build railroads, establish hospitals, create universities and public school systems, and assemble modern world-class armed forces. Even governments changed; in 1911, for example, China witnessed not only the fall of the Qing dynasty but also the toppling of the entire imperial system in favor of republican government.

As debate raged about the value of old, or classical learning versus foreign, or practical learning, a few Chinese citizens openly embraced Western ideals; most, however, preferred to modernize while retaining traditional cultural values: "Modernization without Westernization" became the rallying cry. The art created during that time reflected the many directions taken by this search for identity: a few artists, particularly ones who had studied abroad or who had ongoing contacts with foreigners, espoused foreign styles; others remained allegiant to "the great tradition"; yet others experimented with a synthesis of foreign and traditional styles. A century later, the situation remains much the same.

The experiments by China's first generation of modern artists were cut short by evolving historical circumstances: the disintegration of democratic government into factionalism and warlordism; Japanese invasions beginning in the 1930s and culminating in imperial Japan's rule of China's eastern seaboard and northeastern provinces through the end of World War II (in 1945); the Chinese Civil War (1927 - 1950) between the Nationalist and Communist factions; and the rise of competing governments in Beijing and Taipei, each claiming to be the legitimate government of all of China. Although many famous artists came of age during that tumultuous period, the continuous development of a truly modern spirit had to await the more settled conditions following World War II and the Chinese Civil War.

Mainland China's focus on reshaping its economy, government, and society in the Communist model, along with the Cultural Revolution, actively discouraged artists from exploring new styles from abroad - except, of course, for Soviet-style socialist realism. Even so, some aspiring young, artistically talented Chinese studied painting privately, as Li Huayi first studied Chinese brush and ink techniques with Wang Jimei and then Western styles and techniques with Zhang Chongren. By the late 1970s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, mainland China's prestigious art academies began to accept students again. While they at first emphasized traditional Chinese painting, those schools now offered courses in both Chinese and Western art. They attracted China's best students, thus bringing together tremendous intelligence and talent; in that fertile environment, exciting new

developments naturally sprang up, including experimentation with foreign styles. Beginning in the early 1980s, another group of artists left China for Europe or America, including Li Huayi. Those artists typically studied Western style, even if many of them eventually chose to work in Chinese modes.

Many Chinese artists continue the struggle to embrace modernism but without adopting Western styles, subjects, materials, and formats; accepting the validity of their ancient artistic legacies, they work within the framework of traditional materials, formats, and subjects but also devise new styles and modes of presentation that vary from those of their forebears. As the inheritors of a distinguished cultural and artistic legacy, they feel they can best express their inner selves through a Chinese rather than a Western mode, a feeling in keeping with Chinese tradition, given that the goal of Chinese literati painting was not verisimilitude but the expression of the artist's personality.

Such Chinese artists typically develop an eclectic style that "looks Chinese" on first inspection but that differs radically from works truly in the great tradition, whether in style, technique, or both. Their paintings now are generally characterized as "contemporary Chinese ink paintings," "ink paintings" linking the works to classical ink landscapes and "contemporary" distinguishing them from that tradition and characterizing them as both recently done and with modern, often Western overtones. These artists reject the formulaic compositions, prescribed stylistic modes, and codified brushwork that for centuries were the foundation of classical Chinese painting, and incorporate into their works new media, techniques, or elements borrowed from foreign styles.

Li Huayi's recent works

By turning to the monumental landscape paintings of the Northern Song period for inspiration and by using Song-style brushwork, Li Huayi makes a break with traditional Chinese ink painting, which seeks inspiration in the works of the Qing-dynasty followers of Dong Qichang (1555 -1636). In addition, going beyond the Northern Song style, Li pushes his mountains beyond a composition's top and bottom so that his paintings are close-ups rather than complete panoramic views. Moreover, in pulling the main mountains to the picture plane, Li omits the foreground elements that typically inform the lower portion of a Song-dynasty landscape hanging scroll, foreground elements that boast a body of water and a spit of land, usually traversed by a path, and that give entrée into the painting. The well-trodden path draws the viewer into the painting and then guides him through the landscape – past houses and wine shops tucked within groves of trees or bamboo, around hillocks, across bridges, and well up the sides of the monumental peaks. If the foreground land and water are

gone from Li's paintings, so is the deep ravine, often only implied by a band of mist, that, in a Song painting, runs parallel to the picture plane and that separates the foreground elements from the main mountain, which typically rises in the middle ground. In that context, we further note that Li has also omitted all buildings from his paintings, whether houses, wine shops, or mountainside temples, just as he has also omitted all human figures; his simplified compositions thus focus all attention on the basics: mountains, rocks, waterfalls, and trees. Setting the background mountains on an angle and bringing the landscape elements to the painting's surface give the paintings added monumentality and dynamism. Just as simplifying the landscapes make them exceptionally direct and compelling. These characteristics inject a new and very modern feel into Li Huayi's paintings.

In creating his landscape paintings, Li Huayi first pours ink, and sometimes a little water, onto the unmounted xuan paper,⁴ which he lays flat on the floor. Li likens the process to the manner in which some Abstract Expressionists painters – Jackson Pollock, in particular – poured and dripped pigment onto their canvases. The resulting bold ink splashes superficially recall paintings by Franz Kline, though Li views them as something akin to a Rorschach test, in that in evaluating the splashes he must determine whether or not their form and placement will permit them to stand as the painting's major mountains. If the results are promising, Li spreads the ink around in broad patterns with a wide brush or by lifting the paper's edges and corners in order to encourage the varying liquid ink to run and pool, thereby creating distinct areas of light and dark. In so doing, Li blocks out the painting's major compositional thrusts, just as he also determines the landscape's structure. Through the addition of detailed texture strokes, the mountains take form, after which trees, waterfalls, and other elements are added. Even though Li's paintings bear a striking resemblance to those from the Northern Song period, Li's technique of pouring ink onto the paper differs radically from that of his Northern Song forebears, who applied ink solely with a brush.

Li Huayi's vertically oriented landscapes, such as *Waterfall in Ravine*, *Song Mountain Landscape*, *Sheer Cliffs in Mist* and *Jagged Peak* are traditional in format and proportion although his screens, *Branches of Pine with Rocks*, *Mountain Range with Receding View* and *Rock and Pine*, represent a break from mainstream Chinese painting formats. Most viewers might understandably assume that Japanese screens were the inspiration for Li Huayi's screens, given the importance of folding screens in the history of Japanese art and their familiarity to audiences worldwide. However, during the Tang (618 – 907) and Song dynasties, Chinese artists occasionally painted fixed-frame screens – a single, wide, flat panel of painted paper or silk that was set within a free-standing, square or rectangular frame. By the Ming dynasty, Chinese artists were also creating folding screens, though never in

large numbers. Few, if any, such Chinese folding screens remain today,⁵ but they are occasionally depicted in painting and printed books of the late Ming and Qing periods. Even though his screens superficially suggest a relationship to the Japanese tradition, Li Huayi says that he is reviving an old but little-known Chinese format and that he was inspired to do so by a screen painted by Zhang Daqian (1899 - 1983) that he saw in a private collection in Hong Kong.

Traditional folding screens, both Chinese and Japanese, were intended to stand unsupported on the floor whereas Li Huayi prefers that his screens be flat mounted on a wall, so that the painting can easily be read. When asked why he would want to have folding screen mounted flat on the wall, fully open, Li responded that his interest in painting screens is less in exploring the screen format per se than in perfecting the means of making a large-scale Chinese painting interesting and vibrant. He noted that many modern and contemporary Chinese artists have created large paintings, particularly to embellish the halls in important buildings, but that because Chinese paintings generally do not survive translation from modest to grand scale, those large paintings by and large are not aesthetically successful, even if they accurately record important historical events. In thinking through the problem, Li realized that perhaps a screen's vertical folds – the breaks that separate one panel from the next – could be the key to enlivening large-scale Chinese compositions.⁷

Although the basic reason for combining scroll and screen was to create a new and interesting format for large-scale landscape paintings, Li readily admits that inspiration for *Mountain Range with Receding View*, came from within the Chinese painting tradition.⁸ Li notes that a few Song, Yuan and later paintings include a representation of a fixed-frame, painted screen, the paintings typically showing a group of scholar seated before a screen in a garden. A short hanging scroll is sometimes shown suspended from the top of the screen's wooden frame, the scroll covering part of the painted screen.

Apart from the masterful combination of screen and scroll, another new feature evident in *Mountain Range with Receding View* is Li Huayi's willingness to allow distant, mist-enshrouded mountains to play an unusually prominent role in the composition. In paintings dating to the Northern Song period, the principal mountain, termed the host mountain in Chinese, rises on the central, vertical axis, flanked and buttressed on either side by so-called guest mountains. Generally relegated to a small area near the top of the painting and typically comprising an appropriately shaped blot of well-controlled ink wash, the distant mountains are created without distinct brushstrokes and indeed do seem to be far, far away. In this screen, by contrast, the mist-enshrouded mountains span the entire

composition, providing the perfect foil for the more detailed rendering of the mountain in the hanging scroll. Viewing the entire work, with the detailed scroll pictorially integrated into the broader and more generalized matrix of the screen, is visually akin to looking at a real landscape through a steam covered window that has been only partly wiped free of mist. Intended or not, this element adds another (and very innovative) level of complexity to this intriguing work.

Concerning the assertive role that mist plays in *Mountain Range with Receding View*, Li Huayi notes in his inscription that the inspiration for this screen came not from a landscape painting but from Chen Rong's famous *Nine Dragons* scroll, which is dated by inscription to 1244 and which is now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In that long hand scroll, Chen Rong (1200 - 1266) painted nine intertwined dragons writhing against a dark background of clouds and mist. Since traditional Chinese authors often compare arrangement of mountain peaks to a dragon's spine, Li's reference to the *Nine Dragons* hand scroll is a double entendre, referring both to Chen Rong's dragons and to his mists.

If Li Huayi omitted detailed foreground elements from his landscapes in vertical format, so did he omit them from this marvellous landscape screen. However, even in those paintings in which the pictorial elements obviously are in the foreground, as in the exhibition's gold-ground screens representing rocks and trees, Li leaves much to the viewer's imagination. Thus, in the pair of six-panel screens, *Branches of Pine with Rocks*, the ground line is not articulated – in fact, it is not even implied – so we wonder whether the ancient pines grow from the ground or from the side of a mountain, just as we wonder whether the vertically positioned rock in the right screen is a natural formation or a support intentionally introduced by someone who fears that the horizontally oriented tree might topple without human intervention, as one might tend a favorite old tree in a garden. In fact, Li Huayi says that a poem by Monk Dayu, a tenth-century monk from the Qinglian Temple, inspired this pair of screens.

I had the set of six paintings safely put away,
Knowing how unrestrained your brushwork is.
I do not now seek myriad mountain streams,
Just a couple of pine trees.
Below the trees, place a massive rock,
Along the horizon, some distant peaks.
The nearby cliff should be desolate and damp,

Painted only with misty washes of ink.

In the two-panel screen, *Rock and Pine*, we see the pine's roots and the accompanying grasses, but in this case we wonder what supports the magnificent rock that appears in front of the tree and is the painting's real subject. It is unclear whether the scenes in this screen and in the pair of six-panel screens represent the carefully tended gardens of a country villa, gardens with magnificent pines and fantastic rocks, or segments of a landscape that, although natural, suggest human intervention. In all of these screens, the real point is not naturalistic representation per se, but the play of expressionistic brushwork in varying tones of ink against an otherwise unembellished gold ground. The energetic brushwork of the handsome rock in the two-panel screen and that of the two trees in the pair of screens calls to mind works from both China and the West – paintings of rocks by the late Ming master Wu Bin (active c. 1583 - 1626) and abstract paintings by Brice Marden from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were themselves inspired by Japanese calligraphy.

The screen by Zhang Daqian that Li saw in Hong Kong was the immediate inspiration for his experiments with the screen format, whether developed into the screen-and-scroll format or through the use of a gold ground, since that Zhang Daqian screen was painted on golden silk. However, Li notes that already in the Tang dynasty court artists sometimes painted on gold-surfaced paper or silk. In the Ming dynasty, although most literati artists considered gold grounds to be overly showy, Wen Zhengming (1470 - 1559), Qiu Ying (c. 1494 - 1552), and other Wu school artists occasionally created paintings on gold paper, particularly folding-fan paintings.

Li Huayi believes that only relatively simple, straightforward subjects are appropriate for presentation on a gold ground. Although a small-scale scene of a tree and rock can be immensely compelling when painted on plain paper, a large-scale rendition of the same very elegant subject is more suitably presented on a luxurious gold ground which imbues the scene with life. Although most East Asian gold-ground paintings are done on paper that has been covered with gold leaf, Li Huayi uses both gold-surfaced paper and gold-surfaced silk. In the present exhibition, the two-panel screen is painted on gold-surfaced paper, while the pair of six-panel screens is done on gold-surfaced silk of a certain age – a previously unpainted but well-preserved pair of screens that Li acquired in Osaka several years ago.

Conclusion

Li Huayi was born in China, where he studied traditional Chinese painting, learned something of classical Chinese literature and philosophy, and saw many of the country's important scenic, historic, and cultural sites. In addition, he has lived, studied, and worked in the United States for nearly thirty years, thereby gaining direct exposure to classical, modern, and contemporary Western art. He also has had access to the great repositories of classical Chinese painting in Beijing, Taipei, and the United States. Although accomplished in Western styles, Li has espoused the classical Chinese tradition with a passionate desire to rescue and revitalize it, yet he has clearly distinguished his work from traditional ink painting.

In their artworks, contemporary Chinese ink painters, including Li Huayi, typically incorporate elements – sometimes abstract concepts rather than identifiable elements of style or technique – borrowed from abroad, often so subtly as not to be readily apparent. This phenomenon perhaps is best understood (in reverse) by looking at works by Western artists who have borrowed elements from Asia: James McNeil Whistler's or Vincent van Gogh's paintings, for example, informed by Japanese ukiyoe prints or Franz Kline's works influenced by Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. Although they “look Western,” these artists' paintings would be entirely different without those influences.

Why do contemporary Chinese ink painters adhere to classical subjects, formats, and materials? The answer is complex but has to do with the persistence of a distinguished and exceedingly powerful legacy. Most of Chinese ancestry, whether born in China or abroad, identify strongly with that legacy and wish to perpetuate it. Under the sway of that legacy, contemporary Chinese artists feel it their responsibility to advance Chinese culture. They want to be recognized not only as accomplished artists but as accomplished Chinese artists; moreover, they want to be recognized in both China and the West. In addition, given that Chinese artists had already begun to explore abstraction in the Song and Yuan dynasties, contemporary Chinese painters take pride in advancing that literati tradition since its basis in abstraction resonates with contemporary Western artistic ideals.

And why transmit the old – old subject matter, formats, materials, ideals – rather than wholly espousing the new? However a Chinese artist might respond to that question, the ultimate answer probably goes back to Confucius (551 - 479 BC), who says in his Analects that he did not teach anything new but merely transmitted the wisdom of the past. Thus, the desire to preserve and to transmit the wisdom of the past is as old as Chinese civilization itself; indeed, it is an integral element of Chinese civilization.

Notes:

1. Kaikodo, compiler, *The Landscapes of Li Huayi* (New York: Kaikodo), 1997; Michael Knight and Li Huayi, *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum), 2004; Eskenazi, compiler, *Mountain Landscapes by Li Huayi* (London: Eskenazi), 2007.

2. Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum), 1998; Robert D. Mowry, *The New Chinese Landscape: Recent Acquisitions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums), 2006.

3. See: Alexandra Munroe et al., *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860- 1989* (New York: Guggenheim Museum), 2009.

4. Made in Jing county, in southeastern Anhui province, xuan paper has been the paper most preferred for painting and calligraphy since Tang and Song times, thanks to its smooth surface, fine, soft texture, and great tensile strength, which makes it resistant to creasing and tearing. The main ingredient in xuan paper is bark from the *Pteroceltis tatarinowii* tree, a species of elm native to southeastern Anhui, though up to one hundred additional ingredients may be used. During the Tang dynasty Jing county was under the administrative jurisdiction of Xuanzhou, the city that has lent its name to the paper.

5. It is possible that a few of those sets of vertically oriented paintings now mounted as sets of hanging scrolls might have begun life as folding screens.

6. Telephone communication to Robert Mowry, December 2009.

7. Telephone communication to Robert Mowry, December 2009.

8. Telephone communication to Robert Mowry, December 2009.

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