

Modern Version of Chinese Landscape Painting

By Zhao Li

Art critic

I enjoy my work in the study of art history. It traces the very origin of cultural spirit and aims to find out historical facts closest to the truth. Landscape painting has been an important area of artistic creation for Chinese painters since the Tang Dynasty. It has given rise to a variety of painting styles and a large number of masterpieces. Landscape painting reached an apex during the Song Dynasty. Based on the rich heritage of Chinese culture, its brilliant innovations then provided later generations with abundant resources to uncover the history of painting. In fact, the Song landscape paintings, in addition to their historical values, have always been a landmark achievement in the eyes of generations of painters, which presents another aspect for the study of the Song landscape paintings. In this sense the works of contemporary artist Li Huayi are some recent contributions to this area of study. His creation has an apparent connection to the Song landscape paintings, which the painter himself admitted candidly. It seems that, as some critics have pointed out, many of Li Huayi's works had clearly stated their sources or can be associated with well-known paintings from the Northern Song Dynasty. But this does not mean that the artist is merely copying ancient painting styles. On the contrary, Li Huayi intentionally establishes a more obvious cultural connection, namely "the current stance of tradition", and further enlightens us that "there is no absolute contradiction between tradition and the modern times". But in today's world where originality is highly valued, Li Huayi's creation will surely have to face a lot of criticism. Ever since the spread of Western learning in China, all our concepts of "development" have been under the influence of Darwin's theory of "evolution"; we have created all kinds of isolation and confrontation out of ignorance. A general review of the Chinese art history, however, indicates that what the ancient masters pursued was not to simply "break with the old and establish the new"; their focus was not pseudo-innovation, but to take advantage of tradition as means of acquiring or reviving the life of art and truth. For them, a successful style depended on the ingenious resurrection of ancient traditions. A good painter excelled by combining artistic practice with the essence of ancient masterpieces and converting his understanding of tradition into an inexhaustible pool of resources for his own style. From a more profound point of view, Li Huayi's "current stance of tradition" theory based on such an insight emphasizes an interactive relationship in cultural attitudes between the past and the present. It is aimed at overcoming the limitation of knowledge or experience, eliminating the rigidity and contradiction of concepts, and leading to freedom in artistic practice. Li Huayi's artistic creation borrows the art historian's approach to research and precision in the analysis of painting styles on one hand, and employs archaeologist skills

in processing historical materials and information on the other. He uses his wisdom, vigilance and continuously gained new insight to put together the chaotic fragments of information.

His paintings are characterized by a strong scholarly touch, proving true to his well-earned name as a "scholarly" painter. However, Li Huayi is fully aware that artistic creation is not a pure projection of experience but rather the transcendence of all experience. Though well versed in the Song-style landscape painting, he does not blindly follow this style in practice. He will deliberately pick one of the segments and magnify it, which is undoubtedly an intentional departure from the Song-style because the Northern Song landscape puts emphasis on integrity corresponding to the vastness of the world. His practice is also different from the partial selection of natural scenes by the Southern Song landscape painters because Li Tang's "View inside the Mountain", Ma Yuan's "One Corner Mae", and Xia Gui's "Half Side Xia" can still be said to be poetic renderings of nature. Li Huayi's style is in fact often highly subjective. He picks a certain segment or detail from the Song landscape - a lush mountain, a zigzagging stream, waterfalls, piles of rock on a peak, a traveler in the woods, a waterside house, passing birds, or a lonely boat on the water - these are not from the artist's mechanical rendition of nature but a deconstructive interpretation based on image resources from the study of art history. What he does with the segment or detail is turn it into new images. The purpose of this creative process is to surpass historical experience rather than produce an effective response to nature.

Visualization is a key element in many of Li Huayi's works. It is also solid evidence of his intervening in the contemporary context. As an overseas Chinese artist with a profound knowledge of both Chinese and Western learning, Li Huayi knows history well and is also a master of modern painting. He is skilled in both ink-wash and Western painting styles. From a superficial point of view, he seems to follow the traditional Chinese styles of painting. For instance, he uses silk fans, hand scrolls or vertical scrolls. However, the silk fans he uses are not those used by ancient painters. Coupled with his ingenious rendering and deliberate amplification, they result in the "cat's eye" effect. Some of his paintings of horizontal composition, for instance, produce visual effects similar to those of a wide-screen or flat-panel TV. They are undoubtedly manifestations of what he has gained from his experimentation with the everyday visual experience. Visualization has also led to an easy evolution of the spatial structure and techniques in Li Huayi's works. As for the spatial structure, Li Huayi never bothers to create a multi-level space conversion for the progressive depth of space, but instead presents a limited depth to express a relatively planar structural relationship. His techniques highlight the charms of ink-wash rendering. The diversity of ink colors and the wrinkling and rubbing of different levels of block surface, together with pale ink and white space, help create the effect that

part of the landscape is hidden in the misty clouds, which adds more poetic imagination and visual meaning to the painting.