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CRAFT DESIGN (GLASS)

Tradition in
20th Century Chinese Painting

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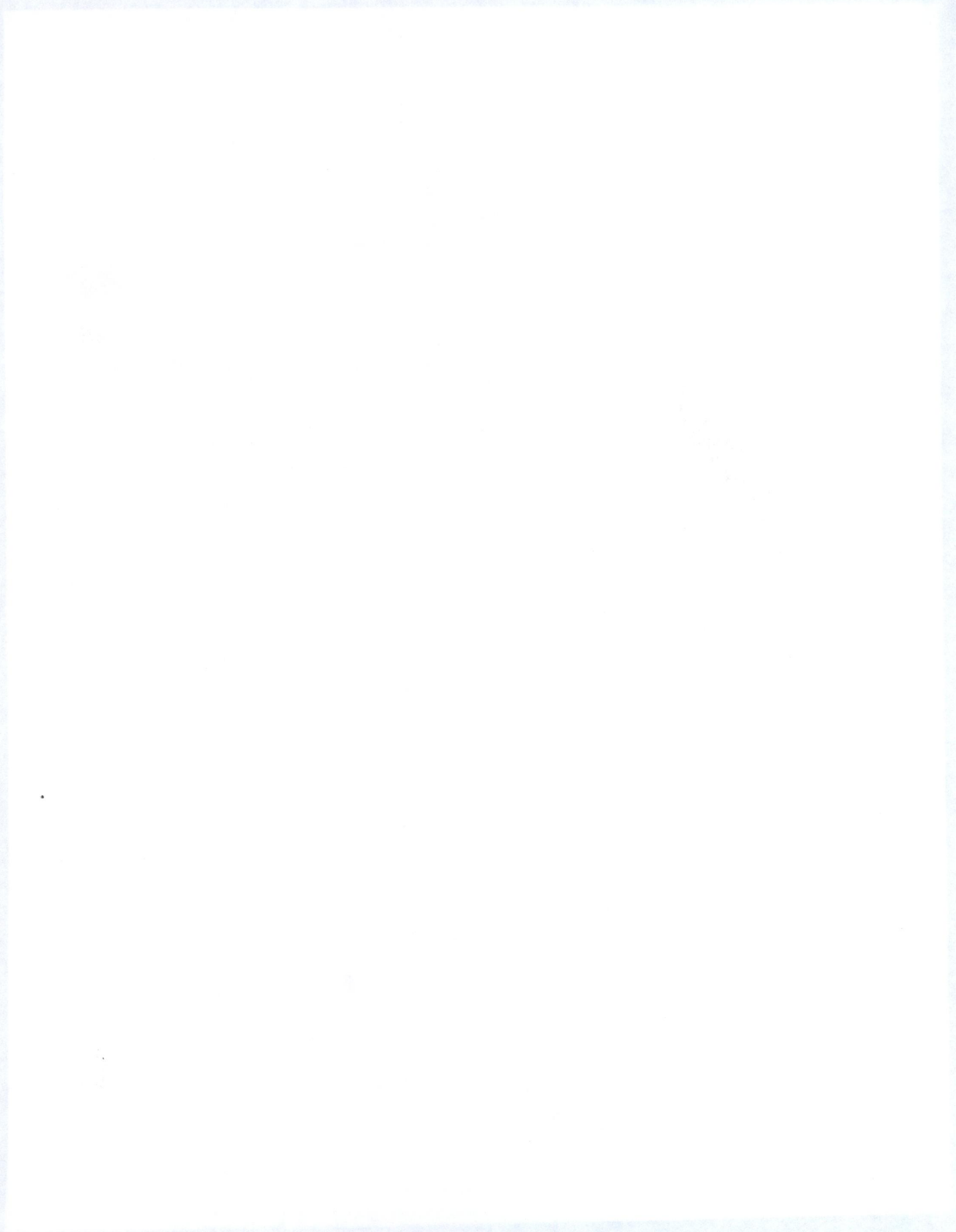
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pl .1 "Two Pumpkins", QI BAISHI



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INTRODUCTION

*"THE DIVINE SPIRIT IS INFINITE;
YET DWELLS IN FORMS AND
INSPIRES LIKENESS; AND THUS
TRUTH ENTERS INTO FORMS AND SIGNS"*

Tsung Ping 4th Century AD

The reason for going as far away as China to explore their craft of painting is this: By removing yourself from your native area and dropping into a completely foreign culture sometimes can give a clearer picture of the values of your own identity or culture. This may be done by observing, receiving and though a complete understanding may not be gained in the original Chinese sense, perhaps the realization that your own ideas and beliefs are true only because you have been led that way since the day you arrived. Thus the tendency to gain more wisdom from far off cultures than your next door neighbour.

We are at advantage today, for the level of communication is higher today than ever. So much information can be found out of China without leaving the island that will broaden the mind enough to influence the thought. Genuine sympathy is felt for distressed civilizations when the media informs as of war, starvation or slaughter.

Painting in China dates back to Jade carvings as the first examples of drawing 4000 years ago. The first drawings in their own right emerged on the tombs of great Rulers of the age. The executors of these drawings were more than likely artisan\slaves who simply ensured the figures had the symbolic elements to revere the deceased. Figure painting was very linear in form with little individuality or expression in the line. It was in the written language that scope for expression first emerged. The conventional guide to virtuous living, as preached to all Chinese children came with Confucius (551-479BC). This sage lay down a code which has been the backbone of Chinese thought for almost two and a half thousand years. It governs convention, ritual ceremony, legality and the written language. The basis of Confucianism is trust of mankind to do good; and that people are born good and decent until they stray from the correct path. Confucius stated that universal love

and faith in your fellow man without self consciousness of the self led to complete content and wisdom. Much of the "laws" were stated in phrases such as:-

'The superior man knows what is right, the inferior man knows what is profitable'.

Confucianism is just one of six schools of philosophy of China but it is the accepted convention.

Lao Tzu was a contemporary of Confucius and an equally wise sage, but he differed in ideas. His discontent lay in the matter of universal love of man. Lao Tzu believed you can only love what you love and it cannot be forced or taken in automatic faith. The example given is that the deer cannot variate with the lion, or in other words, if the sight of your neighbour disgusts you then love for that neighbour is a false one. Another philosophy emerged - Taoism. Much of Taoism rejects and is based not on knowledge but on un-knowledge or belief in what you don't know. It is more of a way than a code of rules, where nothing is forced or corrected. The goal of the Taoist is to reach enlightenment, which may occur under the most banal of circumstances yet from that sudden moment on, living and seeing are changed.

As Buddhism spread from India in 1AD, the most important thing to happen was the marriage of Taoism with Buddhism which resulted in Zen [1]. Painting served a particular purpose for the Zen Monks. The execution of the work, always a calligraphic work, was a form of meditation in the preparation of the ink, (which will be explained further on) and the actual painting is a spontaneous fluid exercise - a releasing agent for the spirit. Once finished the work was looked upon to soothe the viewer. Despite the raw edge, Zen Calligraphy is very suggestive of image, the hope of the viewer was that enlightenment should come one step closer through the balance of black ink on white paper.

Equally so was refuge sought in landscape painting of the Literati. The skill of the brushwork is all important, not the subject or the accuracy of physical detail. What we are talking about in terms of style is "Xie-Yi" painting; a freehand spontaneous non-sober image of an experience. Examples of early Masters of this medium will be discussed in Chapter 1.

As you may gather, the approach was entirely different to the high point of Western painting pre 20th century i.e. Renaissance. When the Jesuits arrived c1600 they brought with them examples of perspective, volume, shading, anatomy in the form of

engravings. Matteo Ricci (c 1552) led the campaign and was sure that Western school of drawing was superior. This notion drew interest from the existing scholars, but the scholars decided it wasn't interesting enough to draw. The ideas of the Westerners was to render form (3 dimensional) on a 2 dimensional space. For centuries China had rendered space itself on the page. The Western ideal was not given much more serious thought until the 20th century. Besides, this was the early Ming Dynasty in China, a time when the Masters were achieved new heights which proved to be the yardstick for a few hundred years and a few more thousand painters.

The materials themselves vary a great deal and are unlike conventional Western media. The basic materials used in pre Christian times are still those preferred today. They are ink and brush (Bimo; the two are brought together in one word describing the use of the two together). The brush is a bamboo handled, long haired type. Usually goat, wolf, squirrel or any animal fur is used. It can change from a fine line to a broad broken line and is capable of holding large quantities of ink. The ink itself is made from soot and a glueing agent such as pine oil. This is compressed into sticks, dried solid and usually carved with intricate designs. It is ground on the ink stone with a little water. The density of the ink is completely up to yourself. It may be thick and glossy, or else applied in thin washes. Colour is rarely used in the kind of painting to be discussed here, which Xie Yi (freehand flowing spontaneous ink wash painting) as scholars believe that so much can be expressed with black and white and all the grades in between. Colour is used heavily in the Gonghi Zhongcai style but it is the Xie Yi Sumi-e painting that is our concern here [2].

Another vital material used and respected for is the handmade paper. This varies in degrees of quality. The highest quality paper is made from the fibre between the bark and the wood of the mulberry bush. The less pulp used, the higher the quality.

Each manufacturing stage of the materials is a fine craft in itself, and should be given huge respect when being used. The grinding of the ink, with the blank white sheet in front of you, is a contemplative moment - the ink should be ground with the left hand, leaving the right hand relaxed, preparing to execute the work. Execution of the painting itself probably takes the least amount of time, for it is knowledge of media, anticipation of the reaction between the three and a clear

notion in the mind as to what you're going to do. Particularly for the Xie Yi painting, it is not imitation - spontaneity is the key principle.

The Xie Yi technique is said to have started when Wang Wei 'broke the ink' using the broken line to squeeze out more variation and vitality from the work. The language of sumi-e reached a peak in the Tang Dynasty. Very few examples have survived, but this era is a milestone in terms of Chinese quality ruling.

There were no galleries in China up until the end of the 20th Century, so viewing was only for private owners or for the artisan student to study by copying the works and spreading the news of the painting further. It was this skill which slowed down much progression in the Ming Dynasty when many believed that the standard had been set by the past Masters and their studies and techniques compiled into 'how to do' books like the "Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting". With the exception of the individual eccentrics, there was little inspiration to go after something new, not to mention the disapproval of the Literati.

As the 'West' became a dominant force after the Industrial Revolution of the 1850's. The need for China to shape and reveal her updated identity became more urgent. Some painters chose to adopt the Western school completely which ended up as nothing more than a continued copying method. Others realized the merits of realism and without totally discarding their own, attempted to express what its like to be Chinese in the 20th century with such a powerful and ancient tradition. It is these artists who are our concern here - how have they dealt with the impact of Europe and America? China has not made such an aggressive challenge on Western ideas, only to those who have sought an alternative. The turn of the 20th Century saw the artists turn to primitive cultures to justify the place of abstract expressionism. It is through the attitude of some of these painters that we hope to learn from the East also, which is between the primitive and ourselves.

We must also clarify what painting is for in this day and age. Rivalry with the camera sends painting in another direction away from Realism. In many senses, it is pointing back towards an Oriental technique and way which the likes of Bada Shanren and Shi Tao (17th Century) have sought. Common ground has been found in some ways this century. The Western school realised something else had to be aspired to to maintain the craft of painting after the camera, with expression of the spirit a new idea since late 18th Century. It was here that the Chinese Masters were exemplary.

Although the two cultures of East and West are very very different since day one, it would be encouraging to discover a note in tune with the other side of the planet. By example of today's painters in China and Europe/U.S.A., I would hope to identify that note.

The outline of the following chapters will cover the development of painting from calligraphic forms from the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD) to the early Qing Dynasty(1644-1911).As progression slowed down during the middle Qing there are few notable painters to offer examples.Two painters from the 17th century ;Bada Shanren and Shi-Tao have left the best work behind and continue to influence many of todays painters.

Chapter 1 deals with these revolutionaries and their predecessors who formed the language of the Xie-He style.

Chapter 2 traces how the East and West began to communicate as technology improved and Western realism was more accepted in China .Ironically, Europe was undergoing a huge change after Post-Impressionism challenged the laws of realist drawing.George Braque and Picasso discovering cubism ,while Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong learnt about one-point perspective.

The Manchurian (Qing) dynasty fell in 1911.It signified the end of an great era for some, and gave hope of brighter future to others.Social Realism emerged ,but served as a propagandic art rather than a progressive one.Those who retuned from a European schooling now applied what they had learnt to the tradition of Sumi-e painting . The wake of Post-Impressionism had inspired Lin Fengmian and others to re-examine their materials and craft . Chapters 3 and 4 deal with examples of this, providing material which shows the Chinese painter as one making fresh discoveries and one who is not threatened by modern technology, confused government or fashion.


CHAPTER 1

– DEVELOPMENT FROM CALLIGRAPHIC FORMS


– THE TANG INK SPLASHERS (THE EMERGENCE OF THE 'BROKEN INK' STYLE)

– THE MING & QING INDIVIDUAL ECCENTRICS.

From the origins of the written language came the source for some of the early compositional experiments. Calligraphy was considered as important if not more so for the judgment of the temperament of the painter. To get an idea of the difference between written Western alphabet in comparison with written communication in China. This is an account by 17th Century landscape painter Wu Li:

"....our characters are made by gathering dots and strokes and the sound comes afterwards; they (Europeans) begin with phonetics, then words, making lines by scattering hooks and strokes in a horizontal row..." 

The difference in approach could hardly be more different. Wu Li goes on to describe differences in landscape painting:

"Our painting does not seek physical likeness, and does not depend on fixed patterns; we call it 'divine' and 'untrammelled'. Theirs concentrates entirely on problems of light and dark, front and back, and the fixed patterns of physical likeness." 

The Tang Dynasty (618-906) was one of China's most prosperous times, in terms of cultural progression, wealth and politics. Unfortunately, all records of landscape painting have been lost, but there are reports of this flourishing period made one century later (847 AD) by Chang Yen Yuan. At the time of it's writing, the Tang days had deteriorated seriously so it was more a nostalgic adventure back to the good days, something the Chinese seem to do much of when times are more difficult and stagnant than before. Nevertheless, we are told of Wang Wei (c.699-761), an all rounder: Poet, Scholar, Buddhist and Landscape Painter. There is no example of his painting surviving, so we must rely partly on myth. His most important contribution was that he was the first to 'break the ink'. Up till then, the landscape painting was done in a fine line detailed fashion mainly on silk. Wang Wei was perhaps the first to use the gestural calligraphic approach to landscape.

It was a much more Taoist ordeal than Confucian. A contemporary of Wang Wei was Chang Tsao. He developed the spontaneous performance of creating a landscape, capturing the essence of all nature, according to the eye witness account: *"Ravaging and pulling, spreading in all directions, the ink seemed to be spitting from his flying brush"*

This brutal approach allowed the ink to act itself first, then with a few structural strokes and descriptive lines, a legible landscape was born;

"To reveal the true essence of a thousand things."

Whatever about the witness getting a bit carried away with the theatrics of it all, it does show the variety in technique and the individual expression bringing out a universal response to the viewer. If nothing else they showed where the limits of painting lay. It also sounds strangely familiar to the Action painters of the New York School in the 1950's in the USA[3]. It was also as much of a relieving agent to the painter as a visual feast for the viewer.

In regard to applying the above technique to a more rigid subject, there were some who painted in elegant and meticulous detail with heavy colour (Gonghi Zhongcai) or on the other end of the scale, the 'Xie Yi' black and white spontaneous method. Regardless of method, there were six principles laid down in the fifth century by Xie He. The first and most important principle places the emphasis on 'qi yun', 'qi' meaning spirit and 'yun' vitality. Qi yun sheng - dong, the first principle, means the rhythm of living things, or movement in the patterns of nature. It is not enough (for a Chinese painter) to merely represent the form of the subject, rather he should try to understand the particular qualities characteristics of a pumpkin, for example. It is thought that by recognising this and identifying it with Xie Yi that something of the painters awareness would be expressed in the work. The spirit of the object was to be expressed through the form, and the spirit of the painter could also find expression or an outlet in the shape of the whole composition of the flower and bird, or landscape or even in calligraphy.

The other five principles dealt with

2. Bone Method - Structural strength in the use and skill of the brush.
3. Fidelity to the object.

4. Correct colour (not necessarily the exact hue or tone but more so the suggestive quality of colour eg red/brown for Autumn).
5. Proper placing of distribution.
6. Transmission of Ancient Masters by copying.

If these six principles were conscious in the mind of the executor, the work would then:

"Broaden the mind and bring joy to the heart" ^

However, over the centuries that followed the Tang, especially in the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) principle number 6 was taken to gloss over the most important aspects of painting. Manuals, such as the Mustard Seed Garden, gave a 'how to do it' approach. Because there were no museums or galleries, the best way to learn technique was to copy the master's compositions. Indeed this was a good way to understand, but imitation to please the Literati's established taste has limited the output considerably.

It is the notable exceptions where hope is restored. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) the rise of flower and bird painting reached a new height. Previously it had been a purely decorative art, yet during the Song Dynasty, it became an art form itself. It provided enough subject matter to satisfy attempts to cover the six principles and could be handled in the freehand Xie Yi style or the linear Ghonghi style.

Landscape painting also moved a little further on or away from the likes of Wang Wi and friends. There came a depth of vision with varying thickness of ink wash. The flat compositional element still prevailed. Amongst the masters of the Song were Li Ch'eng, Kuo Hsi, Fan Kuan, and Yui-Chien. What had developed in leaps and bounds was the varying brush technique. Instead of being either one extreme or the other (Xie Yi or Gonghi) these painters and their contemporaries had begun to investigate all the bits in between unlike the notion that the Chinese painter never painted directly what he saw, there were many on the spot sketches made, more to figure out what kind of brush technique was suitable for the mountain, in accordance with the state of being of the weather, time of year and mind of the painter. Looking at the 11th century work of Fan Kuan *'Travelling amid mountains and streams'* we are reminded that nature is a much greater force than man, if you

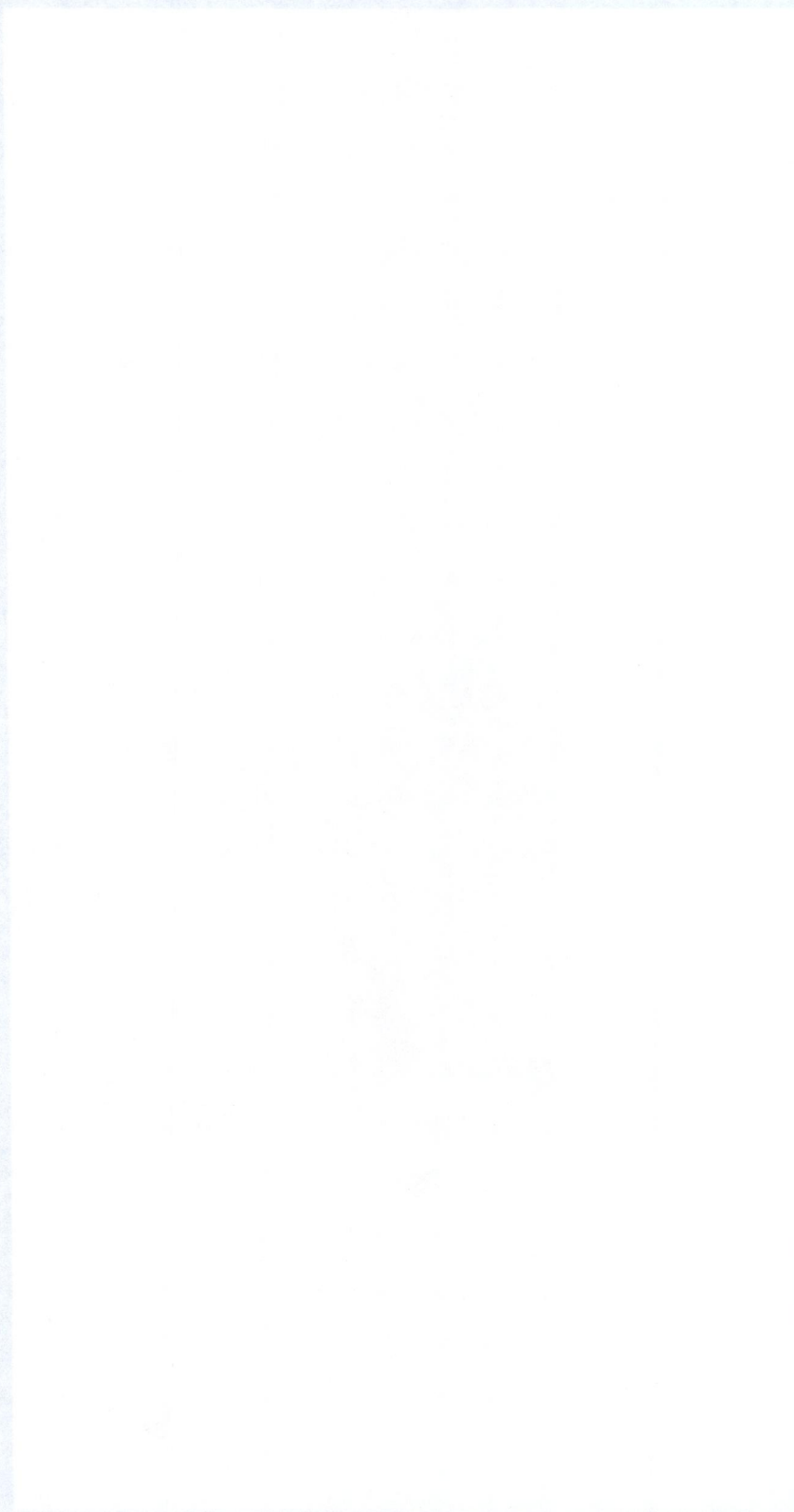
judge the size of the tiny travellers and mules with the massive mountain shearing above in the distance. For the viewer, it is nothing but a sense of awe. There is no accidental reliance, but incredible observations and appreciation through detail. True, it may not have been done beneath the cliff, but all the work and study surely was.(plate 2)

As the dynasties passed by, there were very notable painters loyal to each. As the new Emperor would change the demand for painting, there would be diehard loyalists of the passing age and hopeful progressionists of the new. There were always those who would reflect back on lost glory and those who intended to improve the present. Those who were discontent often turned to Zen Buddhism and stole away to the hills, to develop their own style which may not have been the fashion. The Mongols ruled the Yuan Dynasty until the the Ming (1368-1644). Painting became a symbol of wisdom and wealth to possess. There were many styles on offer to the painter eg 'landscape in the spirit of Ni Tsan'.

There was little progress on the whole during the Qing, the Literati preferring to have the painters imitating the past masters and learning methods instead of a personal vocabulary of brushwork. There was little painting done from direct study while wandering through the hills or mountains. However, these were fine landscapes artists working toward an original style and from direct study of nature around them. They were to influence the revolution in art in the 20th century and maintained the basic principles of Xie He in the 5th century. These were Bada Shanran (1616-1705) and Shi Tao (1641- 1710) amongst very few others. These two painters worked in the Xie Yi style, alive with spontaneity and fresh vision of landscape and bird and flower. The majority were too concerned in perfecting the brushwork alone in the manner of more prosperous dynasties. By the time the Qing fell in 1911, it was high time for a fresh look at nature, especially seeing as Europe and America had developed science, technology and communication to a level which could not be ignored, at least by those searching for an honest expression of what they saw.



pl. 2 "Travelling Amidst Mountains and Streams", FAN KUAN



CHAPTER 2

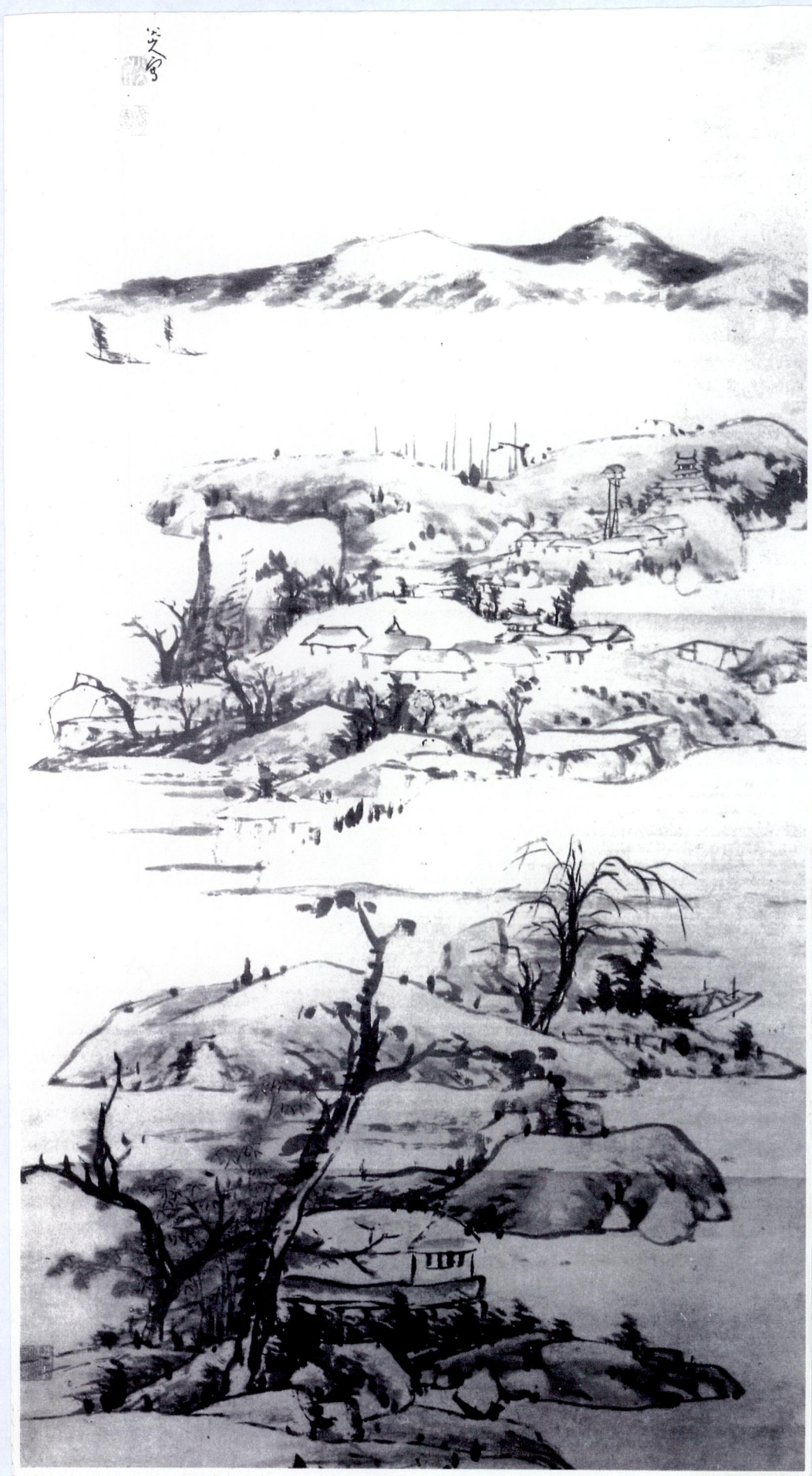
- *THE EAST AND WEST ON EACH OTHERS DOORSTEP*
- *THE FIRST CHINESE PAINTERS TO STUDY IN EUROPE.*

With the fall of the last Dynasty, the Qing (Manchurian), came the setting up of the Republic of China. The first attempts to organize the Republic were riddled with corruption and bribery. It was apparent that China needed to modernize and to most, modernization was the same as Westernization. It was a very rash time in China. Some completely believed that all of China's long rooted tradition should be suddenly dismissed in favour of aspiring to Western virtue, particularly in economics and industry, but also in painting.

The state of Xie Yi painting at the turn of the century was weak. Most schools had their students striving for technical competence with the ink of brush whilst ignoring the updating of 20th century vision of China's landscape, people and creatures. Calligraphy remained a keystone for composition, but even that had progressed little. To those that did continue with the worn out tradition they did so for fear that change (especially toward Westernization) meant destruction, and sure enough, the extremist on the side of Westernization; some intended to destruct. However, too much inclination on either side results in stagnation.

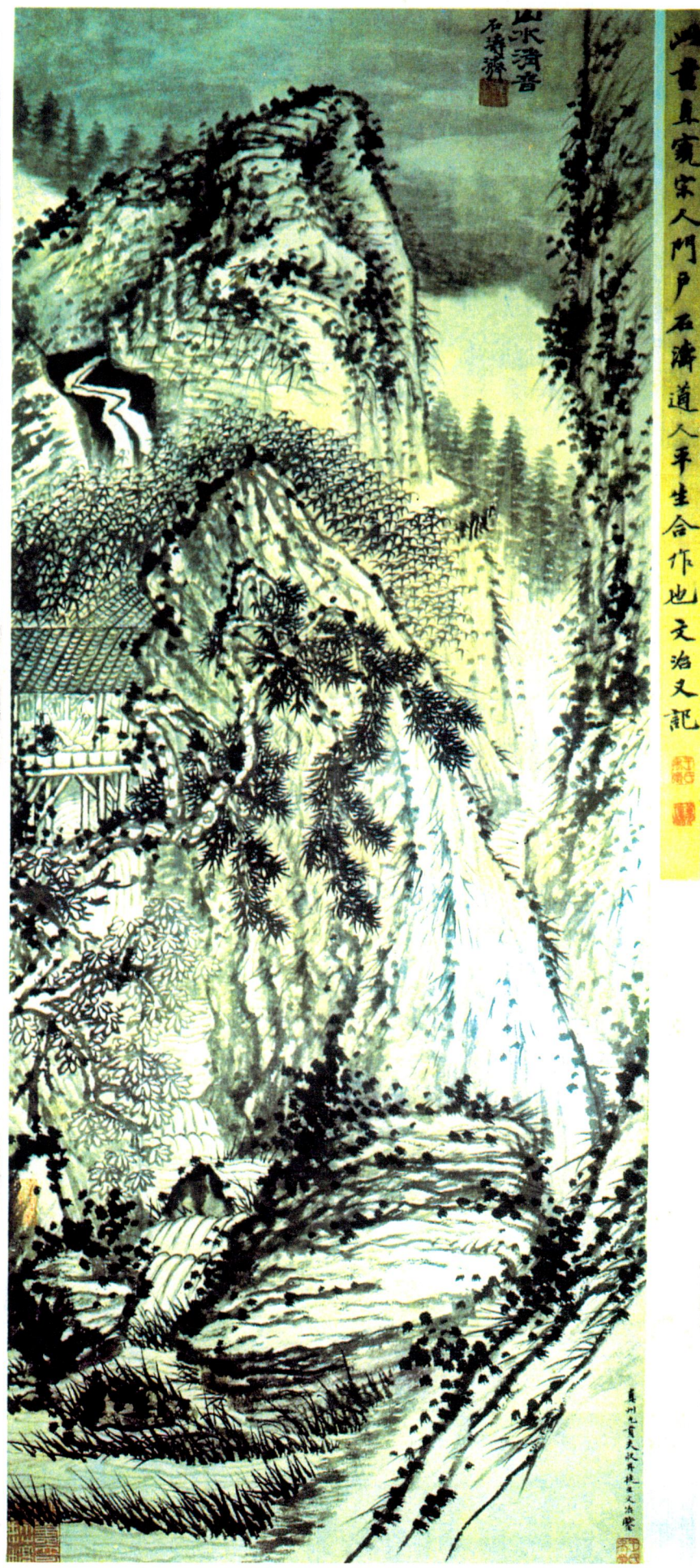
Without doubt, the West was making a challenge on the East. Some took on the realist perspective teaching, often from Japan, where the information was second hand. Oils were the new medium, but instead of applying them to Chinese tradition and landscape and general 'Qi Yun' (vital spirit) they tried to imitate the Western manner sometimes very convincingly and more often not.

The most notable painters to emerge in the first half of the 20th century were influenced by the individual eccentrics of the early Qing Dynasty, namely Bada Shanren (1616-1705) and Shi-Tao (1641-1710). Shen Chou (1427-1509) was to be another major figure of importance. These painters held with tradition, often only by a thread though reports that Bada Shanren was a crazy hermit are usually stuff of myth but his paintings are totally unique in their composition and looseness of brushwork. We shall see his influence over many of today's respected painters in China.(plate 3)



pl. 3 "Landscape", BADA SHANREN





pl. 4 "Landscape", SHI TAO



Shi - Tao was a slightly younger contemporary of Bada, but wrote many essays on painting and produced a massive amount of work. He was concerned with injecting 'Qi Yun Sheng-tung' (spirit consonance and life movement) into whatever he painted. He talks about the 'one-stroke' unifying all:

'The establishment of this method of the one stroke means to give birth to a method from no methods and to make it pervade all methods' ^

He was also supportive of the painter of landscapes to go out and gather stores of visions and images from the difficult climbs or hikes through the country. (plate 4.)

The remainder of the Qing Dynasty failed to give us many influential or original painters since the above two, but their influence was felt definitely on Qi Baishi (1863-1957) who is possibly the most revered painter to shape China's new 20th century identity. Qi learned his trade as a cabinet maker initially, carving insects and flowers onto the doors and so forth. He also learned the craft of seal carving, which is likened to calligraphic brushwork only with a steel chisel (sometimes referred as a Steel Brush). The images were often derived for ancient ideograms from the archaic period. Qi did not seem to be too affected by the presence of the west, nor did he attempt to synthesis it with the East but instead using a direct approach to nature began to forge his own unique style. He was aware of Bada Shanren's style and Shi Tao, but realised that copying their work was a cul de sac. Shi Tao had written:

"The eyebrows and eyes of the Ancients cannot be grafted onto my face....."
and

"People are fond of talking about this rule or that principle established by the Ancients. I just wonder what guide lines the older Masters followed before the rules and principles were set up". ^

The essential teacher to the painter is nature and the stuff to be learned is her essence. This knowledge can only be gained through experience of it and hard work to capture it, whether in the 5th century or the 25th century.

Towards the latter part of his life Qi mastered the Xie Yi method of still life; shrimps, chrysanthemums, lotus flowers and insects (plate 5). There is within the recurrent theories an infinite range in composition with confident and expressive brushwork. If the European Impressionists had anything to teach him it was with regard to colour, for often bright primary colours were used within his work -



pl. 5 "Lotus Flower", QI BAISHI



bright red cherries or maple leaves used in association with the traditional black ink. The paintings have an air of great simplicity and spontaneity yet with accuracy to the given form - spirit of the object expressed through its form.(plate 6)

The Calligraphy of Qi Baishi was also a key part of many of the paintings, itself becoming a part of the entire composition. The calligraphic line would continue through to the rendering of the magnolia branches.

While many began to adopt the Western school of painting, the problems of shading and one single vanishing point per landscape eventually proved against the very nature of all Chinese painting. There were many who went to study in Paris in 1910s and 1920s. The irony of this lies in the fact that while Xu Beihong (1895-1953) and Lin Fengmian (1908-1991) were studying aspects of realist drawing, Matisse, Vlaminck and even Cézanne had been trying to get away from this approach and become more concerned with picture making and relating forms to colours and juggling the composition. The Europeans had begun looking towards the East for a direction to take them closer to a more honest response to nature. Van Gogh leapt off the springboard of Japanese prints while Monet became concerned with the application of colour via use of the brush. When the first Chinese came to study in Paris it was a change for a dialogue between the two influences on each other. The new medium of oil on canvas offered broader limitations. The question that arises, however, is can an Oriental master the medium of the West (oils, in the renaissance manner) and can the Westerner paint landscapes with the sumi-e ink and brush (in the Ming Dynasty manner). What usually results is imitation, and an imitation will always be judged with the original so that faults are easily identified.

That is not to say that something cannot be learned on either side . Xu Beihong (1895-1953) studied in Paris and initially aimed to master the narrative realism of oil painting. He made a strong attempt at it, but his paintings of that would suggest Gericault and a comparison between the two would expose Xu as very mediocre and out of place. He returned to China and sought out his roots in the sumi-e. He has become famous for his painting of horses, said to symbolize brave new China, but the painting is quite conventional and often a repetition of the same technique of painting horses. It is a kind of synthesis of East and West in regard to perspective and very acceptable. It seems that Xu went for the safe bet in the end, more power to him (plate 7).



pl.6 "Maple Leaves", QI BAISHI





pl.7 "Running Horse", XU BEIHONG



Another painter who studied in Paris in 1917-1923 was Lin Fengmian (1900-1991). Looking at his work, the influence of Matisse is obvious, along with the Fauves' movement. The common link between Fauves and Xie Yi would be in the spontaneity of gesture and rapidity of execution. Lin picked up plenty of tips about the use of colour, especially the transparency of Western watercolours. He also seemed to believe Matisse's principles about line, that line was the division of colours and in his understanding that a painting should be a soother for the eyes, a place for the mind to relax(plate 8).

This itself was an idea the Chinese had for centuries, but it seemed that during the late Qing (18th and 19th centuries) that it had been forgotten or at best - neglected. Lin managed to hold on to his Chinese identity, made visible in his work with the unifying line Shi Tao spoke of and the broken ink qualities suggesting what the Tang ink flingers aimed at.

Lin spent many years teaching, trying to explain the evolution of the painter. He compares this evolution to that of the caterpillar wearing a cocoon around himself in order to become a flying butterfly. The cocoon, Lin says, is woven from techniques and influences, but more important is the strength needed to break the shell and release the butterfly full of grace and colour.

His own cocoon was woven from both Fauve expressionism and his childhood teaching in traditional media in China. As an example of an Oriental coming to terms with the Western style but without losing his native language and skills, they don't come finer than Lin Fengmian.



pl.8 "Nude", LIN FENGMIAN



CHAPTER 3

– THE INFLUENCE OF THE REVOLUTION ON THE SECOND GENERATION;

Qi Baishi, Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian all became well respected within their own lifetimes; early enough to set up schools and museums teaching what they had learnt in Europe and at home. They intended to encourage all that came after them to go in search of their own identity and original style so that through them the shape of China could truly be identified. There were some excellent followers and students, but also there was a movement against this kind of individual art.

Communism bled into China through the veins of Mao Tse Tung. With the art schools all over the Republic now teaching realist drawing skills of the West, Mao felt that all painting (and any other art) should serve the people and aid the improvement of society in general. He forced many to idolise him as a kind of messiah against the odds, and against recent history. What emerged was Socialist Realism [ref.4]. This was a narrative style of painting and symbolic of the 'dawning of a new era' for China. Mao felt that the landscape filtered through the artists spirit and shown via his own originality was a selfish kind of painting and did nothing to benefit the state of the country or closer to the bone, worship Mao Tse Tung. Generally speaking most of what was produced under his reign was judged by the symbols - 'The Eagle spreading her wings'. This kind of stuff was hoped to give hope by showing the strength of three generations and enthusiasm of the youth for the future.

Much of painting since 1949 in China (up to 1979) was adapted as propagandic art, and red, a colour not usually associated with Chinese painting, was introduced as a symbol of Communism. In order to gain acceptance, or perhaps avoid the trouble, established artists incorporated things like the house where Mao once stayed in into otherwise fine landscapes. Shi Lu's "Turning to Northern Shanxai to Fight" (plate 7) even has a figure resembling the stout balding Mao with grooms and horse (1959). There were many paintings on the subject of '10,000 Crimson Hills'. The painting may not have any political reference other than the title which itself is a reference to one of Mao's poems, thus showing the loyalty of the painter to Mao. Political painting is a discussion all to itself and doesn't really solely concern itself with the compositional elements sought after by more individual painters. The style of painting does not combine East and West nor does it try to develop tradition.



pl. 9 "Turning to Northern Shanxai to Fight", SHI LU



The fact is that there was much more exciting developments being made by followers of Qi Baishi or Lin Fengmian.

Wu Zuoren and Zhao Wuki were amongst the first to continue the investigation of East and West benefiting each other. Wu Zuoren (b.1908) studied in Paris around 1930. He did not receive the typical training in sumi-e but on his return to China he took up this medium and applied it to some realist pictures of Yaks, Camels and Pandas with a great deal of confidence. Wu is a master of using empty space to depict distance by careful composition a size of it's dwellers. He's a good example of someone going out observing nature directly with an awareness of western perspective. The theme of using blank space as infinite background is close to Taoist principle of emptiness and negative space. The void is the holder or container of everything. The example from 'Lao Tzu'

*"Cut out doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful;
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there".*

It is a very non Western principle and a difficult one to come to terms with, though Wu's painting "Camels" is explanatory.(plate 10)

Lin Haisu (b.1896) was also a developer of landscape painting. His method is reminiscent of Chang Tsao in the Tang Dynasty, whereby the ink would be thrown onto the paper at random with trees and peaks of mountains added to give a fully legible landscape. The paintings are touching the abstract in many cases. He has also worked in oils but the life of the ink or paint is often the starting point, this use of colour is unique also. For Liu and his contemporaries, it was not a case of rejected tradition but exploration of the self with traditional means. Again it was Shi-Tao who had the heaviest effect on his mainly self taught style, direct observation of his favourite subject, the Huang Shan Mountain(plate 11). Through his knowledge of materials he has allowed himself a wide range of techniques and employs the accident with wise control. He is amongst the founders of the 'New Art Movement' in China and found an important slot in modern art history.

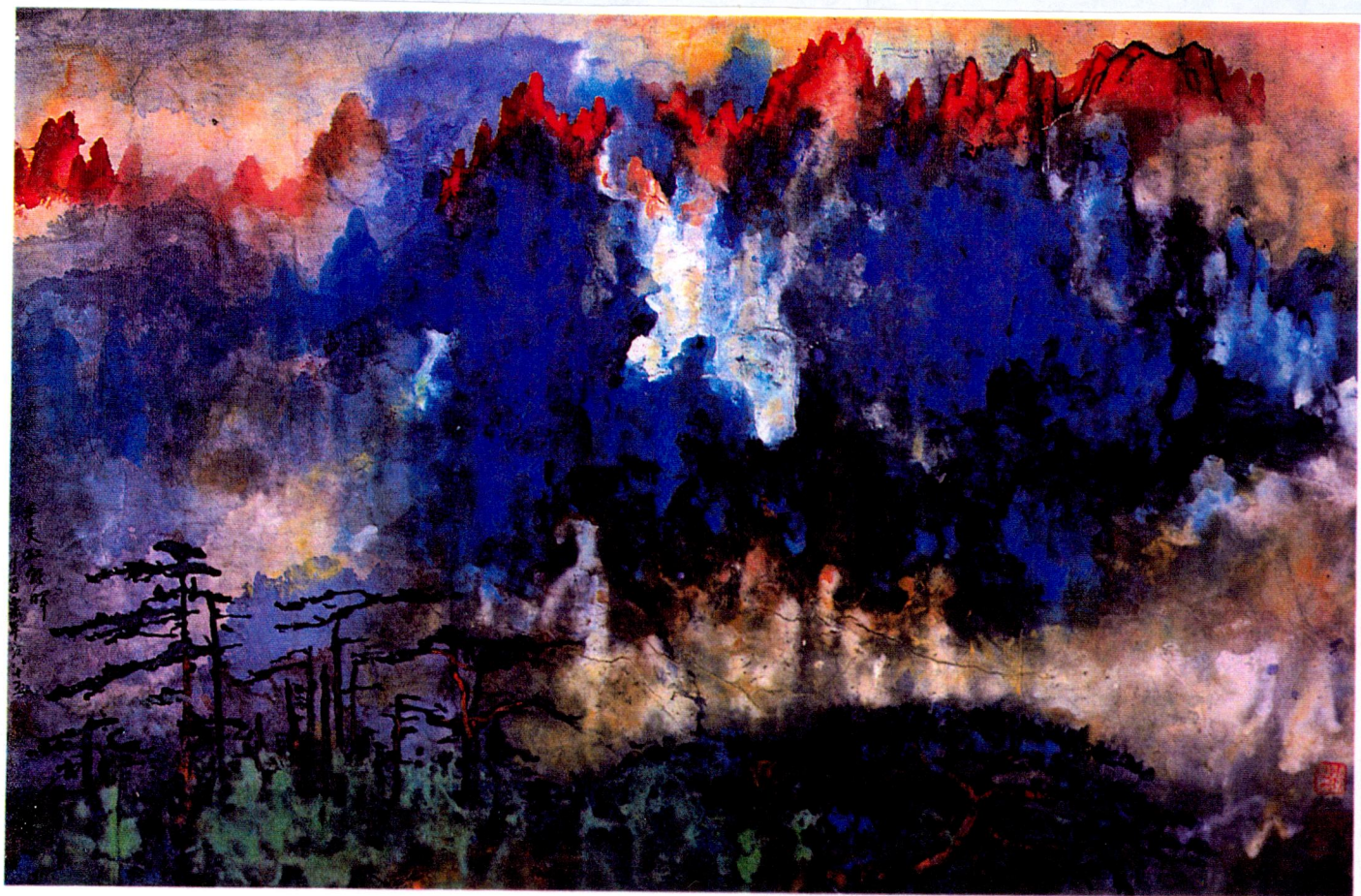
Bada Shanren was to be a major eye opener for Ding Yan Yong (1902-1978). He studied in Japan during the 1920s where it was Matisse's simplification and flat colour which provided inspiration. Ding could see what was happening in Europe

駝圖

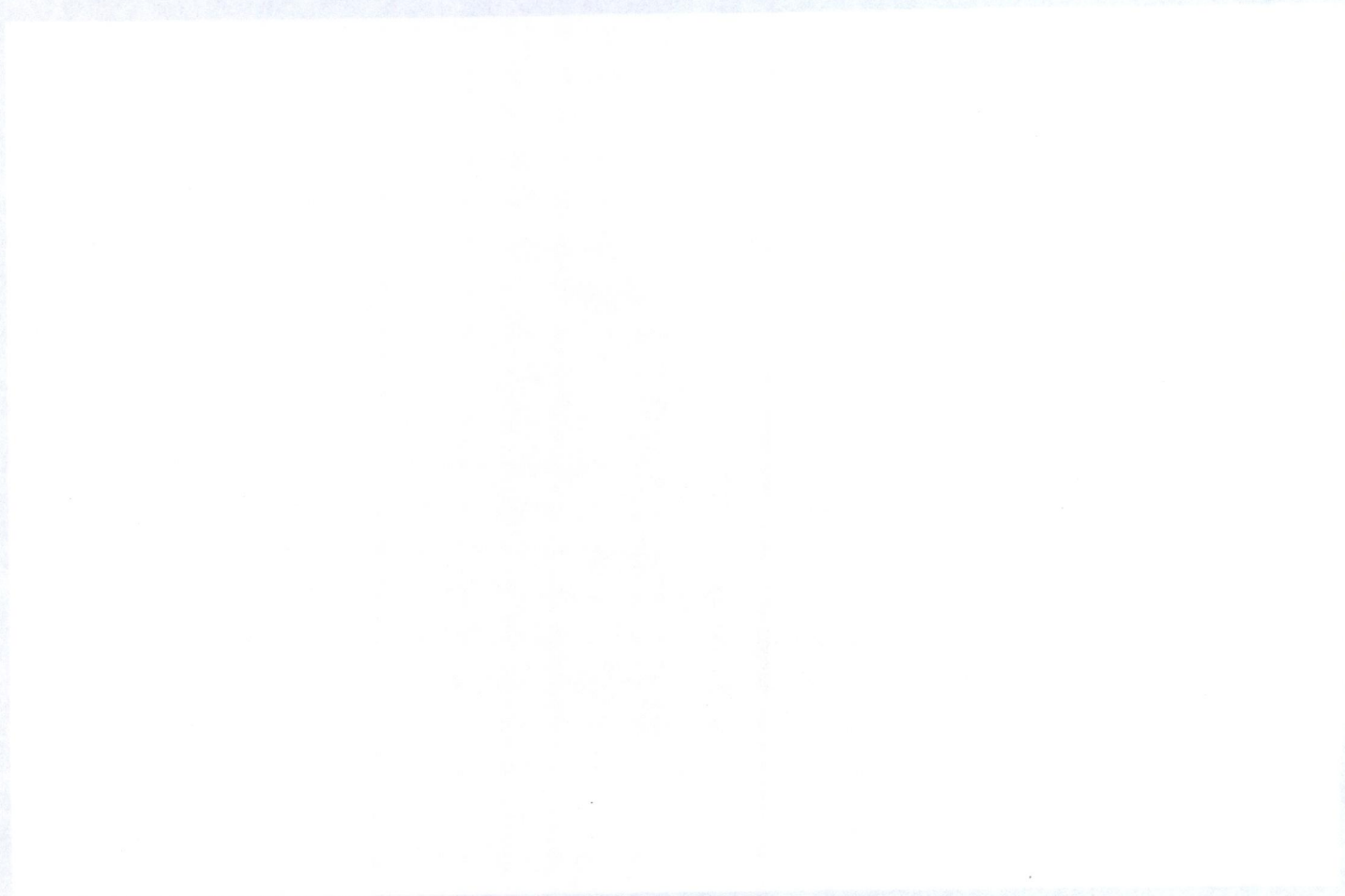
作人字漢上
元世宗







pl.11 "Huang Shan Mountain", LIU HAISU



with the Fauves at the time, a kind of return to primitive, free expression. His subjects have an air of humour which allows him to get away with a very loose and delicate line. He spent a long time trying to get this right and did so in the late sixties and seventies up to his death. His 'Mandarin Ducks' 1975 has all the breath-taking elements of strong brushwork, with the nest of eggs oddly balanced on the thin branches. He makes no secret of the fact that this is ink on paper, giving a raw honesty to the painting characterized also by adventurous calligraphy and archaic like seals he carved.

Ding spent a lot of time painting opera or theatre figures with the minimum amount of strokes and maximum amount of expression of Chinese style. They are certainly in the Xie Yi mode and tickle the heart of every viewer.(plate12)

A pupil of Lin Fengmian was Zhao Wuki (b.1924). Zhao Wuki has worked mainly in oils but with a definite Chinese tinge. The paintings have landscape qualities in them, but remain very abstract and owe something to Jackson Pollock for the gloopy drip effect. Zhao trained in France but would still be considered a Chinese painter. He is one of the better examples of an Oriental mastering oils to his own benefit. Zhao mainly worked in the post Second World War period and felt the work of Klee and Kandinsky pointing him back to his own roots, particularly with regard to Zen Buddhism.(plate 13)

The non objective approach of the Zen Monks gives their calligraphy a timeless quality. It has nothing to do with the demands of Mao Tse Tung or the dilemma of tradition with modernization. It is more like the last resort, exhausting the paint as paint itself and laying its characteristics bare on the canvas or paper. Whether Pollock influenced Zhao or the Orient influenced Pollock towards the meditation aspect of the physical release of painting is arbitrary. What is notable is that in the last fifty years there has been a strengthening link and dialogue going between West and East and this has to be healthy. Abstract expressionism may have had its day in downtown New York but it is a permanent reference point from which both cultures can work away from or towards.

Zeng Youhe has carved a unique position for herself in the history of China's development this century. Through a solid training in Chinese methods allowing her to learn the styles and spirits of the Tang to Qing Dynasties (6th -20th century). She says of herself:





pl.13 "Landscape", ZHAO WUKI



"I am not an artist intent on erasing the heritage of our past but I do believe it is high time to add new concepts that belong to our age"

Instead of taking from the calligraphic elements of brushwork, Zeng studied the surface texture of archaic Jade vessels and ceramics. She speaks of the 'controlled accident' where the ceramicist, when applying the glaze allowed the coating to crack in a uniform way. This too, like Pollock, or Zhao Wuki or the Zen Monks, is a timeless non fashion or style kind of art, capturing "the pulse of nature".

She is aware of the national identity problem of China today, but believes that if you are of Chinese temperament at birth and schooling, it will be a part of you till your death. Of the foreigners who have delved into Chinese brushwork as part of their own style she reminds us of Mark Tobey, who spent time learning the calligraphy skills but did not try to pass his work as Chinese, it was always characteristic as Tobey's style.

"An artist may consciously strive and expand his or her horizon but on an unconscious level, he or she cannot escape from the inner self".

It is this inner self that is the "the very creative essence of his art".

The painter may identify with work of past Masters but it doesn't call for direct brush stroke for brush stroke imitation. Zeng has painted "landscapes in the spirit of Hongren" but they are individual creations only inspired by the feeling gotten from looking at Hongren. The actual painting almost has a Cézanne-ish or cubist feel to it. Zeng Youhe has developed many styles from traditional down to ambiguous abstraction and a clear reaction to the flood of Westernization and a new watermark for Western viewers in touch with the flood of 'Easternization'.(plate 14)

Humour has played an important role in recent painting by Li Kuchan (b.1898). The birds of Bada Shanren show their influence(plate 15). In Li's birds and ducks, the liveliness of ink and bright colour determine the style. He studied under Qi Baishi and his own influence is felt on today's younger generation, at least those interested in brushwork.(plate 16)



pl.14 "Landscape in the Spirit of Hongren", ZENG YOUHE\





pl.15 "Small Birds", BADA SHANREN

pl.16 "Ducks", LI KUCHAN



CHAPTER 4

-FINDING A LANGUAGE FOR THE PRESENT IN CHINA;

TWO MODERN PAINTERS

LIU MAOSHAN

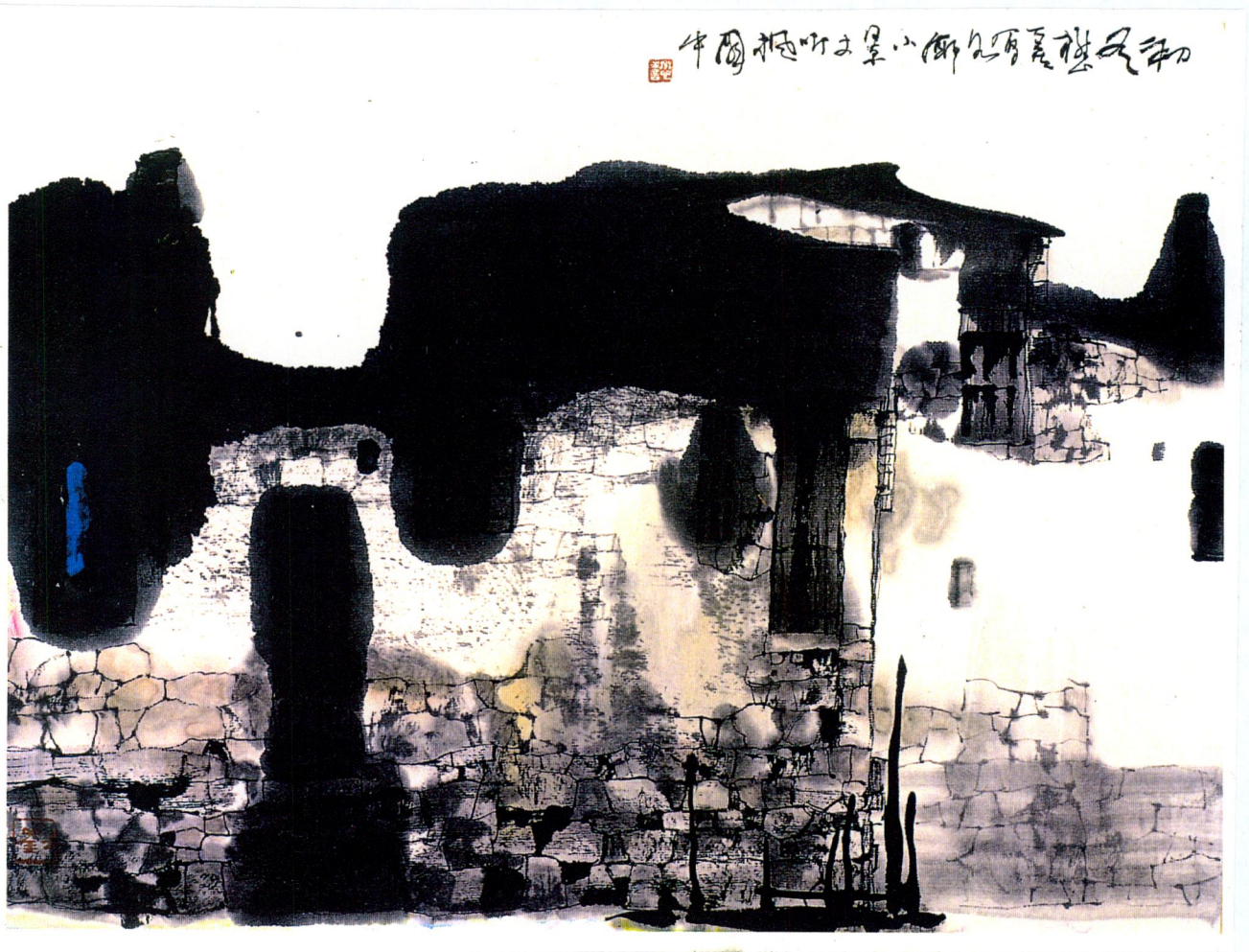
WANG MING MING

"The techniques employed by the past artists are insufficient for the presentation of life today. The unique language of an artist has to be rested through the extended practice of the artist himself". ^

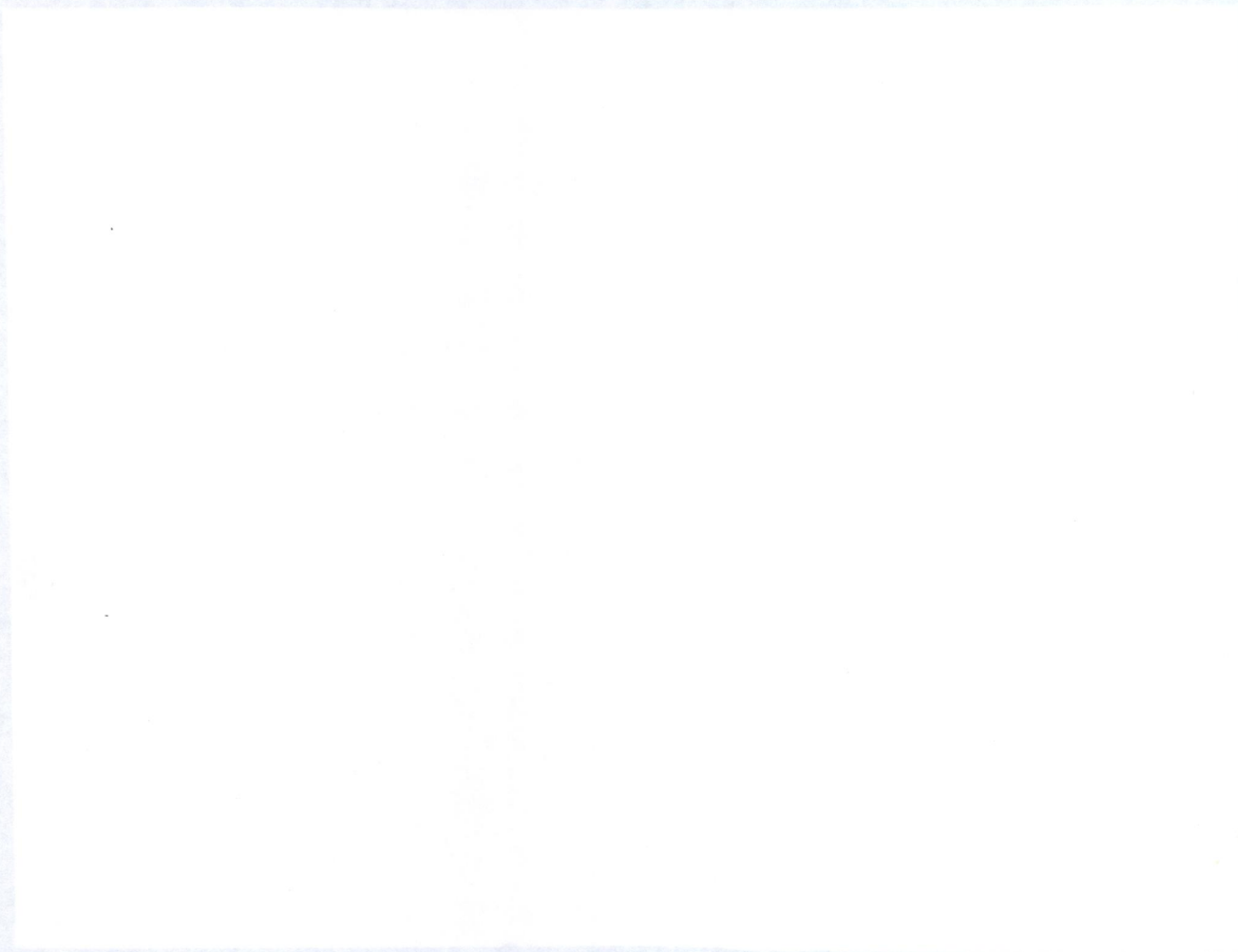
This is Zhu Ming talking in 1991 in relation to Liu Maoshan, painter from the Shuzhou district. Shuzhou boasts a great tradition in ancient painting and the focal point for many Literati painters and Masters. The above quote urges today's painters, East or West, to go directly to nature and tell about it in visual form, in as clear a language as is possible. This learning does not come after studying technique but the appetite for it should be inspired by the reaction to a painting by Shi Tao or Bada Shanren, who urged Liu Maoshan to go exploring.

Liu (b.1942) studied in his local institute where the Western school of drawing was taught. It was not till he had full understanding of their laws that he began to re-explore Chinese painting and with knowledge of the two and beneficial points of each. He has studied his immediate environment with fresh eyes, heart and brush. A strong reminder of his Western teaching involves shading and colour, with a bare direction of perspective, yet with more than a single vanishing point. He is still very much dealing with Chinese 'rendering of space,' held' rather than volumes and if there is volumed distance it is often achieved through variety of texture and suggestion, for example "The Charm of the Water Village Series"(plate 17)

His use of colour is a success story. 'High Autumn' is identified so by the careful drops of sienna browns, yellows or reds. Equally so with the applied colour to clusters to suggest the blooming "Cherry Blossoms"(plate 18). It is not the particular sharpness of accuracy of the scene which merits the painting but the overall impact of varied brushwork and liveliness of composition. Occasionally some things like street lights and car traffic become to be represented, though it is never fully a picture of a bus or anything. The sky often dominates the situation. It works in putting you back on solid ground by reminding you there is something much greater than you, which you have to live inside of and have no control over it



pl.17 "The Charm of the Water Village Series", LIU MAOSHAN





pl.18 "Cherry Blossom", LIU MAOSHAN



whatsoever. Emptiness has long been a topic of discussion in Eastern philosophy, to the point that it is as much the 'air breathing you' as 'you breathing the air'. Likewise, is everything in your world revolving around you, the centre, or are you revolving around your world of daily routine, place and people. It could be said that you are the centre of emptiness, the contents of which you cannot control entry of or how they effect you. Neither can you decide how empty it will be because other people's emptiness may include you, if only in thought. It is very difficulty to empty all the thoughts from your head and 'think of nothing'.

In painting, it is easier to represent 'nothing' or infinity. Blank paper is the negative, ink the positive. Liu Maoshan knows this, and how to suggest it as is evidently shown in his many scenes of bridges or houses with heavy bleeding black ink meeting directly with untouched paper.

In Qi Baishi's painting "Three Fish", it is easy to imagine all the blank space as water, even though there is no ink, only that which depicts the image of the fish and the calligraphic inscription(plate 19). Often empty space is a key tool of the Chinese painters, whether it stands for cloud, sky, water or air, it is the container of all. Between the jet blackest ink and the white paper, the world exists and waits to be shown.

The landscape painter about to paint a picture has far more to deal with than the camera. The problem with a photograph is to compose within the viewfinder what is already there; for example tree in field. When you stand in front of it and decide you are going to paint a picture of a tree in a field, it must be remembered it is a picture of the tree will result, and not necessarily the tree itself. If the painter draws many of that breed of tree he will gain a knowledge or skill on how to convey that to paper. Even within that there are many techniques to give across the message that there is a tree in a field. The options open are infinite on variation. It is this which allows all the calligraphists to depart from the basic accepted pictogram and compose with the directions and crossings of the lines on a page. If Liu Maoshan sees birds flying across the sky he can hardly draw them in as quick as they are there, for they are in constant motion(plate 20). The difference between the interesting paintings and not so interesting would be that the latter is a display of the skilled language of the painter whereas the formative paintings of this language show the direction of this. The wrong thing to do at this stage would be; and often happens; realise you have got fluent landscape language to paint any situation. It is then that the painter will lose his grip on the very nature he is trying to understand



pl.19 "Three Fish", QI BAISHI





pl.20 "Flying Birds", LIU MAOSHAN



through painting it. The nature of Nature is its infinite motion, that it is never frozen. If the painter stops looking it might be that because he got it right, it can only go wrong from there on. Or in other words, don't feel you're ever on top of the mountain, because to go further is to go back down. You have to go up or down, but you're never fully at either one. That's the way it goes.

Liu Maoshan tells it like it is:-

"I have a deep affection for my hometown, Souzhan, which I would like to present in my drawings. Therefore, based upon the technical foundation I acquired from the Art College, I kept searching for ways to present this affection in my life. Roaming and colliding in the road brushes, ink and water, I gradually came up with the present way "...in front of him (the picture) there is such a long long road". ^
The job is never complete, because time doesn't stop. If you run into a crowd of Westerners on the road, you do not have a right to tell them if they're right or wrong or that you are. A Zen poem states;

*"If you want to get the plain truth,
Be not concerned with right and wrong,
The conflict between right and wrong
Is the sickness of the mind".*

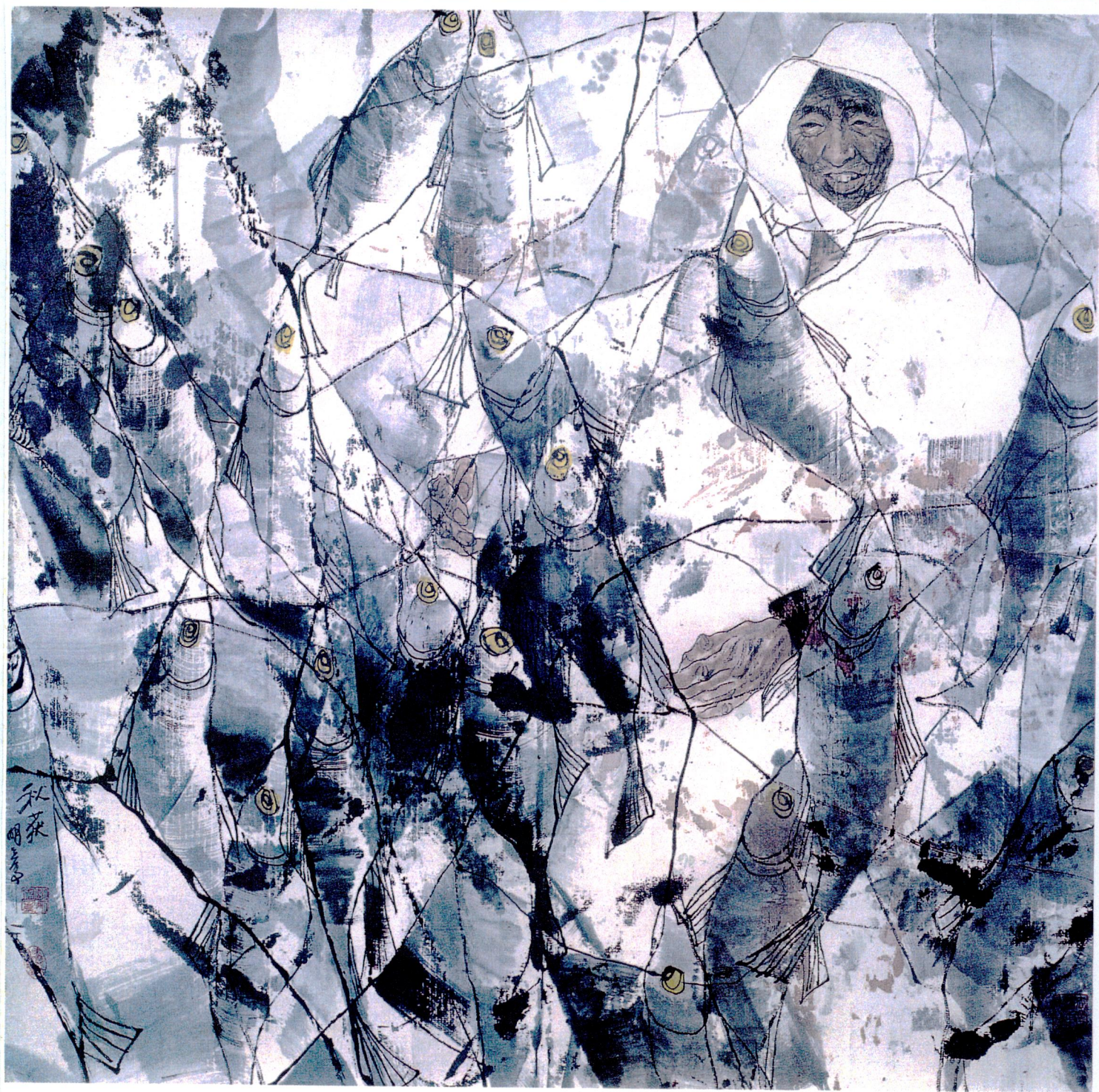
^
Right and wrong are interchangeable depending on where you're coming from.

Wang Ming Ming (b.1952) is ten years younger and seems less bothered than Liu Maoshan in synthesizing East and West and gained a lot of guidance from people like Wu Zuoren and Li Kuchan. Brushwork is the skill he is mastering. Even drawings made when Wang was 8-10 years old show serious awareness of composition rearrangements and depth of vision. ^ He has since developed many techniques but few which he uses to repeat what he may have achieved already. Change in surface treatment is vital to treat changing matter. The ink is never stuck in one place and is very broken. If the abstract expressionism had any rub off, it was more a justification of an Eastern aesthetic - the limits of the Western School, typified in Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, provided only the beginning for China to progress her painting that a splashy scribble of ink could depict a branch of a tree at the same time looking very much like a splash of ink. It's the context it's in that sometimes separates the New York action painters from the Chinese painter

using the 'splash' technique. Our friends Bada Shanren and Shi Tao show their legacy again in this, as with many modern painters.

Some of the Wang Ming Ming paintings are reminders of cubism with perhaps more attention paid to surface treatment. In particular the ink and colour paintings of fish in the nets in 'The Autumn Harvest' places the fish nets in front of the viewer with the fisherman behind. A lot of dry ink is pulled around to balance out the composition. The drawing is quite broken up and the pattern of the net providing the rhythm (plate 21).

It must be remembered that the painting is a sensation for the eyes. Painting is not essential for basic survival or self improvement, but suffering may be lifted by what it does provide. Vision must constantly be refreshed by both painter who tries to paint the mountain and by the viewer who tries to see the painting.



pl.21 "The Autumn Harvest", WANG MING MING



CONCLUSION

This latest invasion of 20th century technology, economics and art has certainly shaken China's roots. It could have a benefit by shaking so hard in that it should force those painters who wish to reveal a true identity of their country through painting. With so much change and upset, the core of the identity must remain after the dead leaves have been blown away by the wind. The 20th century is not the first one to raise such fundamental questions on beliefs, but it may be the most foreign influence, moreso than India (Buddhism) or Japan or Manchuria. China is well used to handling (or at least surviving) invasion and challenges on her way of thinking.

While it is fair to say that India kept going the same direction with Buddha (East to China) and war with Japan a more internal affair, the difference with Europe and America is that they never really were a part of the East. The Western migration magnet, peaked in the 1950s with the observation that so many people were migrating to California that perhaps there was a steep inclination in the American landscape allowing you to freewheel all the way. Upon discovery of America, the deal offered to settlers from Europe heading out west was that there was free land for all. We are still trying to realise the damage and annihilation of the native American Indian existence. When Marco Polo went to explore China, he was bound to their tradition by powerful governmental system in the shape of Kubla Khan. Perhaps China has held ancient tradition so long and become so ancient because of the continuous invasion and changing dynasties forced the people to be on their guard a bit more and to be ready to absorb the culture of strangers[5].

The first attempts by Western painters to seek beyond surface recording began to emerge via Cézanne and late 19th century expressionism, our image of the human being and what it feels like to be one are given to us by Picasso for a large slice of this century. In fact, Picasso is a prime example of a painter concerned not with what the world (a piece of still life) looks like, but what it's like to look at the world and it's contents. Often Picasso has given us drawings concerning this very problem of the artist and his model and what kind of relationship is going on while the painting is going on. The experience, situation and time are all considered with the realist image of the model only one of the determining factors of the painting.

Ironically, while this was going on in Paris in early 1920s, the first Chinese pilgrims came to investigate realism and perspective. The idea that the finished

work was only going to be an abstraction of the subject was in its infancy in the West as an approach, whereas it was in a state of old age and exhaustion from copying in China through the Qing Dynasty. The one thing in common with China and Europe/U.S.A. at the turn of the century was that all felt a need to express the condition of things in a honest fresh way. Many felt that realism and Westernization was the key to China's new identity and began to copy, which they are extremely skilled at, what was unfortunately becoming dated. There are no Chinese painters who have shaped an image in Western manner who have stood the test of time in China. Those who have held prolonged and continuous interest have studied or at least been aware of the Western school.

Increasingly, Chinese artists are inspired to go and paint their surroundings after looking at Cubism, Fauvism or abstract expressionism and not necessarily the renaissance style. It is also up to the West to give a faithfully education of present art to the East. This must be presented in a flexible manner, which will not attempt to prove either side as right or wrong, or try to ignore history.

It might appear a confused country to us, far removed from our way of thinking and often very cruel in its factual history, right up to today. It is difficult to be immediately informed of Chinese current affairs but concern with that would also miss the point of China to a European. There are many examples of the pupil asking the master scholar "What is Buddhism/Zen?" To which a definite answer is never given but something along the lines of "Here is a tall Bamboo; here is a short one", as the Master points to the Bamboo Grove. There is no ultimate answer, or rather the answer or goal is not to be sought. Everything lies between its extremities hot/cold; black/white and it is the balance or the relationship between the two where the here and now lies.

A frozen image in a photograph takes the exact time of the glance (1/500th of a second) to capture. In order to paint a still life it usually is a case of looking at, say apples and oranges, then looking at the drawing surface and looking again back and forth. Each time you see the fruit will be from a different angle or state of information (6 apples 4 oranges) or a few moments later. It is not enough to strive to reproduce in three hours what can be seen directly in a fraction of a second. Looking at Qi Baishi and his still life's of cherries or shrimps, however, is closer to the glance than the information gathered over time. Painting does not seek to capture time, it is not a suitable medium, neither is photography. Qi Baishi's paintings evoke a sense of praise for his subjects, simple and executed without over

working it is a statement about cherries which indirectly would be a statement about the world and conditions that cherries have to live in (plate 22).

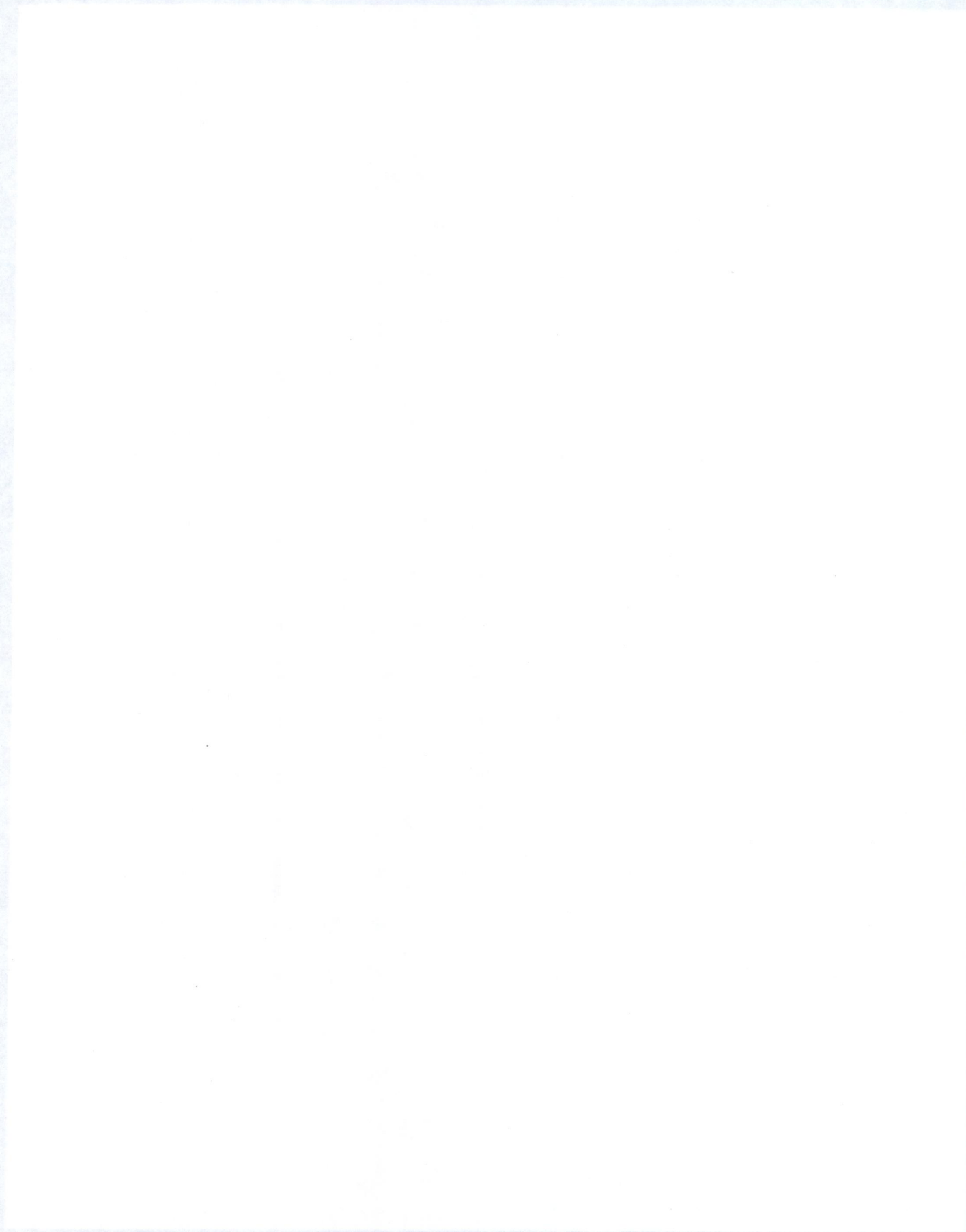
It has been said of the Zen calligraphy painters that they made 'timeless' works of art. They do not refer directly to a plastic subject, they cannot be measured in terms of faults or correctness. The same has been said of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. It may be as accurate to say that all evidence of time is put straight clearly in front of you - the ink was allowed to fall 'here' for longer than 'there' thus a range of marks are made with time as the measure. For the calligraphic gesture whose line begins thin, thickens, curves, breaks and ends, it is a more honest depiction of time. Evidence of the brush stroke have been a characteristic of the 20th century expressionist movement, the expressionist would paint now as a means of relief and 'letting out'. Once this is done, it is looked at for relief, identifying with the urgent feeling and the coming through of individual, yet universal emotion. This has to be done with visual rhythm and composition, which differs from a spider whose legs have been dipped in ink and wanders across the page. Balanced timing of where to put what marks in relation to each other. In music, it all works between sound and silence, if this can be related to painting, sound is the mark or ink, and silence would be the white paper. A mark can be still, or moving and usually a still line will be of constant thickness and density, whereas to 'speed it up' would involve changing thickness to light and heavy, the line can reveal all.

Mark Tobey has long held an interest in Oriental painting but without direct copying of that style to form his own. The living line was the greatest lesson he had to learn; but by living in accordance to his word - Seattle U.S.A. he was aware of that.

"When I was struggling in Japan and China with sumi-e ink and the brush trying to understand the calligraphy of the Far East I became aware that I would never be anything other than the Westerner that I am. But what I did develop there was what I call the calligraphic impulse that has opened out new horizons for my work"

Rather than an attempt to be an accomplished Chinese calligraphist, the learning is found in the attitude and the response to the work of genuine Chinese painters. Very few Chinese have totally taken on the abstract expressionist approach as 'ground breaking' because it has been an inherent element of traditional painting for centuries. Remembering this artists like Zeng Youhe and Wang Ming Ming have





absorbed paintings of Max Ernst, George Braque or Pollock and Motherwell. From these investigations a chord is struck within the foreign observer, East or West, which resonates what good painting is to them. It is what Tobey calls the impulse which is beyond nationality, spoken or written language and history or time.(plate 23)

It could be said Tobey's are 'inner landscapes', often with a seasonal title or time of the day. You need not necessarily be in Seattle or Germany to know what their inner landscape feels like. He describes the feeling when looking at his work; he explains -

"You can't rest on anything, either you're bounced off it or you have to keep moving with it".

It's reminiscent of the Literati of the Ming Dynasty seeking refuge in a landscape painting of 10,000 miles of the Yangtze River, where the eyes rest on the painting and let the mind wander, broaden and bring joy to the heart. We have as much to learn from China and other equally far away cultures as they have to learn from us. It's important not to imitate but to understand the spirit of the executor and their intentions. If you intend to change the world into a better place with a painting you have failed, if you intend to record every moment in time onto painting you meet the same fate. If you give a response to the quickest glance at an expression of somebody's face, to labour over it is fatal. All images will filter through the painter, the real life thing is unlikely to pass through this filter - what does filter through can tell as much about what is left behind in the filter and something about the filter itself - the painter - in whom we seek our identity.



pl.23 "Untitled", MARK TOBEY



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- [1] See Alan Watts' "The Way of Zen" for detailed description of Taoism
- [2] There are many volumes written on the technique of ink and brush painting. "The art of Sumi-e; appreciation, techniques and application" by Shozo Sato gives excellent technical information and also includes a full copy of the traditional "Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting".
- [3] The development of this movement is covered by Irving Sandler 1978 "The New York School", in particular, chapter 3.
- [4] See Chuang Shen's essay "Art and Politics: Study of a Special Relationship in Contemporary Chinese Painting", p. 178 ;" Twentieth Century Painting in China"
- [5] Michael Sullivan traces the early influence of Europeans in China and the introduction of Oriental prints in Paris on the Post Impressionists, in "The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art".

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