PAINTING ACADEMIES AND WESTERN INFLUENCE

With the establishment of the republic in 1912, one of the first initiatives undertaken by the new government was the restructuring of China’s educational system. Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), a traditionally educated scholar who had studied Western philosophy for seven years in Berlin and Leipzig, was appointed minister of education. Cai believed that aesthetic education should take the place of religion as a vehicle for remaking society. To lead this initiative Cai appointed Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), a revolutionary journalist and later the founder of the Communist party, to the post of dean of letters at Beijing University and Lu Xun (1881-1936), the leading leftist writer of the day, to be the head of the Social Education Bureau with responsibility over cultural institutions. Both Chen and Lu advocated the reform of Chinese painting. In 1917 Chen published an article criticizing literati painting, particularly the orthodox school of Dong Qichang (fig. 4), insisting that “painters must follow the tenets of realism” as a means of rejuvenating Chinese painting.

The humiliation China suffered on May 4, 1919, when the former German-occupied territories were turned over to Japan, caused students and intellectuals to advocate strongly China’s modernization and Westernization, including the practice of a new realism in literature and the visual arts. This trend, known as the May Fourth Movement, or the New Culture Movement, led to a number of students going abroad. In contrast to such students as the Cantonese artist Gao Jianfu (1879-1951) and his brother Gao Qifeng (1889-1933), who had their first exposure to Western-style painting in Japan, a growing group now traveled to Europe, where they came into contact with the diverse currents of Western tradition and modernism. Returning to China, many became educators who played a prominent role in establishing the curriculum of newly founded arts academies in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. While these artists instituted classes in life drawing and Western techniques, a schism soon arose between those who advocated the study of classical models and nineteenth-century academic realism and those who embraced the modern European styles of Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse.

Xu Beihong

The most influential champion of Western academic realism was Xu Beihong (1895-1953). The son of a painter in Yixing, Jiangsu Province, Xu moved to Shanghai in 1914, where he made backdrops for photography studios. Inspired by the ideas of the political reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who advocated “an integration of Chinese and Western art to create a new era of Chinese painting,” in 1917 Xu went to Japan to study Western techniques, returning the following year to be an instructor at Beijing University. In 1919 Xu became the first government-sponsored artist to study in Europe. Until 1927 he was in Paris and Berlin, mastering an already moribund academic manner.

Returning to China in 1927, Xu assumed the leadership of the art department of Liangjiang
Normal College, in Nanjing, which later became part of the prestigious National Central University. Believing that the reform of Chinese painting required the assimilation of Western methods, Xu strongly criticized the slavish imitation of his country’s ancient masters and urged artists to “adopt the materials and techniques invented to depict real objects.”

_Grazing Horse_, dated 1932, exemplifies Xu Beihong’s fusion of East and West. He employed the conventional Chinese medium of brush and ink, but his drawing technique is purely Western. Rather than defining the horse with calligraphically energized outlines, Xu sketched the horse impressionistically, with light and dark washes and uninked areas of white paper left to suggest the modeling of light and shadow. Reflecting studies from life, the horse’s complex pose—foreshortened body, twisting neck, and naturalistically splayed forelegs—is deftly rendered in a few well-placed brushstrokes, while the layered tones of the animal’s tail give the feeling of movement.

Xu Beihong’s depictions of spirited stallions evoke the long tradition of images of horses as emblems of state power and metaphors for men of talent. However, Xu’s terse comment in the upper left of this painting, “Short grass covers only the horse’s hooves,” indicates his frustration at the lack of government action following the Japanese establishment of a puppet regime in Manchuria and bombing of Shanghai in 1932. Xu painted countless similar images of horses throughout his career. This early example was done for the son of the noted artist Qi Baishi (pp. 26–37) on the occasion of a visit by Xu to Qi in Beijing. Three years later Qi added two inscriptions to the picture, explaining in the second that when Xu painted it he had failed to bring his seals, which is why the work lacks the artist’s impression.
Liu Haisu

One of the artists who challenged Xu Beihong’s academic approach to Western art was Liu Haisu (1896–1994). Born into a prosperous family in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province, Liu attended a private school to acquire a classical education. By the age of fourteen his precocious talent led to his enrollment in a Shanghai school devoted to oil painting. In 1912, at sixteen, Liu started his own school, which later became the Shanghai Academy of Art, one of the three centers for Western painting in China before World War II. Liu introduced life drawing into classes, but a display of nude figure studies in 1915 led one critic to accuse Liu of being a “traitor in art,” a label Liu proudly had cut into a seal.

In 1918 Liu visited Japan for a year. Three years later he lectured on Impressionism and Postimpressionism at Beijing University. Liu went to Europe in 1929 to study in Paris and to travel before returning to Shanghai in 1932. He made a second European sojourn from 1933 to 1935. After 1949 he was director of the East China Arts Academy, the successor to the school he founded in 1912. However, during the anti-rightist campaign of 1957 against intellectuals who had opposed Communist policies during the Hundred Flowers Movement of the preceding year, he was criticized for his unwillingness to be transferred to a teaching post in Xi’an and for his disparagement of Soviet-style art. He was stripped of all his titles. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966 by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and his supporters to combat the bureaucratization of the party, Liu was kept under house arrest until 1972, but he continued to paint until his death in 1994.

In spite of Liu’s progressive outlook, his oils in the coarse impasto manner of Van Gogh changed little during his long career, and his Chinese-style paintings show a similarly vigorous, unsubtle brushwork. *Pine Cliff and Waterfall*, dated 1964, exemplifies Liu’s enduring interest in traditional landscapes, especially in the bold style of the early Qing individualist master Shitao (fig. 10). Like Shitao, Liu sought inspiration directly from nature, particularly the dramatic cliffs and craggy pines of Yellow Mountain (Huangshan). As he proudly proclaims in the legend on one of the seals on this painting, “Yellow Mountain is my teacher.” In this monumental

Fig. 10. Shitao (Zhu Ruoji, 1642–1707). *Outing to Master Zhang’s Grotto*. Ca. 1700. Handscroll; ink and color on paper, 18 x 112 3/8 in. (45.7 x 286 cm). Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1982 (1982.126)
image Liu’s dashing brushwork and ink washes are swept up in a single dynamic compositional movement, in which the rearing cliff is made to resemble a giant cresting wave.

Lotus Peak, a small album leaf done in 1975, when the artist was nearly eighty, reveals a very different approach. Liu’s picture, the subject of which is one of the principal peaks of Yellow Mountain, resembles a sketch from nature in its sensitively drawn contours. Gone is the bravura brushwork of a decade earlier. Instead, Liu animated his landscape by juxtaposing areas of ink wash and blank paper to create the effect of sun and shadow, white clouds, and verdant foliage.

Liu’s experimentation with Western ideas and techniques, reflected both in his drawing and in the strongly contrasting areas of light and dark, was a way of liberating himself from traditional constraints. His inscription reads: “I haven’t painted for a long time. [My brush] has grown cold and clumsy. It is a pleasure to wash away [styles] of the past and present.” At the same time Liu remained attached to his native landscape, as he reminds us with the seal “Yellow Mountain is my teacher.”