

## Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting: Li Huayi

One would hardly expect the turbulent world of contemporary Chinese art, defined by rapidly shifting fads driven by market concerns, to provide a conducive environment for the emergence of a master painter who draws his influence from a classical tradition dating back over a thousand years. However, despite all expectation to the contrary, traditionally-inspired ink painting has become one of the most exciting areas among the contemporary international diaspora of Chinese artists. In particular, Li Huayi, who leading New York Times critic Souren Melikian has predicted “will stand out as the towering genius of 21<sup>st</sup>-century art,” is revolutionizing the world’s conception of Chinese art, through the ancient practice of changing the present by turning to the past. Melikian goes on to state that:



*The art of Li Huayi...is one of those miracles one hopes for without really believing that they can happen. That a Chinese painter born in 1948 to a wealthy Shanghai family who lived through the Cultural Revolution came out unscathed is astonishing enough. But that he should have become a master of unparalleled magnitude who draws on the age-old tradition of the Chinese literati while taking it to an entirely new stage, is truly astounding.*



Born a year before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and growing up during the Cultural Revolution, Li’s early artistic environment was shaped by the crude aesthetic of socialist realist art as public propaganda, and he served for a time as a designer of government-sponsored posters. Yet, traces of Shanghai’s role as both a dynamic

center of traditional ink painting and an international port through which exciting new ideas from the rest of the world were first introduced to China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries remained beneath the surface, and Li was trained informally in the techniques and aesthetics of both traditional Chinese ink and European oil painting during the first two decades of his life.

In 1982 Li immigrated to the United States, where his experience as a government-supported propaganda artist made him woefully ill-prepared for the free market, and he was forced to make a living delivering groceries. At the same time, he found

new opportunities to widen his artistic vision, both through exposure to Western influences such as German Expressionism and Abstraction, and through a deepening knowledge of historical Chinese painting that ultimately took him far beyond the Shanghai School of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the emergence of monumental landscape painting during the early Song dynasty (960-1279) a thousand years earlier.

The technical sophistication of Song dynasty painting, made by artists for the highly refined tastes of the court, had centuries before been abandoned in China in favor of more individually expressive styles, and was far removed from both the Shanghai School and the socialist realist art of Li's youth. Furthermore, its highly demanding brushwork was in direct opposition to the frenzied mass production of art for the market that still characterizes much of the work done by Chinese artists today; between 1992 and 1996, Li produced only sixteen paintings. Yet, the vision of contemporary art set forth in these works was truly paradigm-shifting, accomplishing the alchemical transformation of the archaic past into a radical new direction for the future.



As the Honolulu Museum of Art turns its attention to contemporary Asian art, building upon the foundation of our world-renowned collections of traditional Asian art, and in particular our exquisite collection of Chinese paintings from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, this new vision is particularly relevant. Working directly with Li, the museum will present a new exhibition of his ever-evolving work. To quote the artist:

*If you want to create something, you base it on yourself, your own situation, your own cultural background, your own tradition. Art can be traditional and still be contemporary.*