

## The History and Current Situation of Modern Art in the Philippines

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### Art in the Philippines in the 1920s

Modernism in the Philippines followed the same pattern of a reaction to the establishment, yet the specific character of modernism in the Philippines far outweighs in importance the similarities it has with the general aspect of the modernist phenomenon. Thus, we are here primarily concerned with defining what modernism is in the Philippine context, since each country gave rise to its own modernism in reaction to specific artistic conditions, adapted these aspects of European modernism that it found most congenial to its soil, and finally pursued its own ways of appropriating and indigenizing a European phenomenon. Modernism, then, was not a neutral process, welcomed with a fresh and unproblematic enthusiasm as a liberating impulse to an art floundering in academic formulas. Indeed, the course it took in the Philippines was shaped by the material conditions obtaining in the country and overdetermined by Philippine culture and traditions.

Basically, modernism was a "reaction against" established canons. In the Philippines, it was not a reaction against a grand centuries-old classical tradition and its subsequent decline into academism, as in Europe, but a movement away from three art institutions: the prevailing Amorsolo school that had become the Academy; the remaining influence of the nineteenth century *Academia de Dibujo y Pinura*, the local surrogate of the European Academy, and the miniaturist school of portrait painting patronized by the elite. It is notable that when modernism was introduced in the Philippines in the late 1920s, the practice of figurative painting using pigments on a two-dimensional surface was just over a hundred years old. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, the subjects were mostly religious, since art was bound up with the colonial project of Christianization.

Apart from the Canonical forms introduced with colonization, there existed the large but marginalized body of indigenous arts and crafts related to ritual or daily use: woodcarving of spirit images carved in wood or designs and ornamentations that formed part of the early tradition of Malay woodcarving, textile weaving, basketry, earthenware pottery, and jewelry, traditions shared with the rest of Southeast Asia. Colonization, which began with the burning of native artifacts that the colonizers condemned as works of the devil, of which surviving examples form part of foreign ethnographic collections, drove a wedge between the "high art" of painting and sculpture and the artistic expressions of the people called "folk art" or "ethnic art," as in the surviving productions of the indigenous Filipinos.

## The Amorsolo School

In the 1920s, the Amorsolo School of painting, with its head Fernando Amorsolo, and its members, Irineo Miranda, Dominador Castañeda, and some others, asserted its dominance, especially since it was esconced in the School of Fine Arts of the state university. Its predominant influence would continue to grow into the decades of the Thirties and Forties, during which their work became widely known, not only as paintings, although these were widely reproduced in calendars and cards, but also as illustrations for books, publications, and corporate advertisements. In sculpture, Guillermo Tolentino who had trained in the academy in Rome, was the proponent of classical sculpture, as seen in his public monuments and statues.

What modernism would be up against in the following decade was primarily this prolific school, which turned out hundreds of genre paintings and landscapes. It amply satisfied the needs and tastes of the American patrons, the colonial authorities, and tourists in search of "exotic images" from their new colony in the East to display in the United States. Perpetuating the myth of the "beautiful land," Amorsolo was best known for his rice-planting scenes in which the arduous occupation of peasants working in the green paddies seemed to be gracefully choreographed against a backdrop of huge mango trees, mountains, and a nipa hut or two. To enhance the romantic undertones, he used the technique of backlighting with golden-hued sunlight to soften and gild the laboring figures. Also part of the Amorsolo imagery were folk observing the pieties of going to Sunday Mass in picturesque settings of stone churches graced by flame trees. Then, too, there were the cornucopia paintings of rosy young women and men carrying baskets of fruit from the harvest. Doubtless, these superbly executed paintings contributed much in stimulating the art market and it was Amorsolo as the leading artist who systematized certain of its aspects. Moreover, these images constituted a seductive form of orientalist myth-making, which lent a bright tone to the colonial endeavor and assuaged all sense of social responsibility on the part of the landlord art patrons. In fact, such images continued to be urban fare in the years of the Thirties marked by peasant uprisings in the countryside.

In the Philippines, modernism was also a reaction against the local surrogate of the European *beaux-arts* academy. The *Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* was the official purveyor of the ideals of classical academism. It fell under the management of the *Sociedad Economica de Amigos del Pais*, which brought over Spanish art instructors and imported copies of European paintings to serve as models. The products of the Academia were mainly dark-toned monochromatic landscapes, genre and character studies that had an air of detachment. Forming a separate category were the *ilustrado* or elite portraits of the nineteenth century, which came in fashion with the opening of the country to international trade and cash crop agriculture, resulting in the unprecedented prosperity of the new merchant class. These were characterized by the miniaturist style, which painstakingly brought out the details of costume, primarily the embroidery and accessories, to give evidence of social refinement. Art patronage in the nineteenth century was thus directly linked to



the ambitions and presuppositions of the emergent bourgeoisie.

### The Context of Modernism

There are other points of difference in the socio-historical contexts of the introduction of modernism. In Europe, modernism reflected the dynamic spirit of the Industrial Revolution. The initial impetus of impressionism came from a fascination with the aspects of change in all areas of life, especially the new technologies. The moorings of art patronage were cut off from Church and State to reflect the open market of *laissez-faire* capitalism. Modernism in Europe was likewise marked by an enterprising and risk-taking spirit, opening vast possibilities in materials and resources, stimulating new theories such as those of Einstein, Freud, and Marx, on humans and the world.

But in the Philippines, first as a colony of Spain and then as a protectorate of the United States, the pace of development was much slower; a great part of the country then as now was still mired in feudalism, despite the introduction of the money economy and a clear urbanizing trend. It was therefore not surprising that even with the introduction of modernism, rural imagery persisted in the visual arts marked by a strong reflective relationship with material reality. Thus, there was no radical break between tradition and modernism that came about through social change such as was ushered in by the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Instead, modernism gave talented artists the chance to break away from the clutches of the Amorsolo School and to invigorate an artistic practice that was deteriorating into academic repetition. Lacking the cosmopolitan character of the School of Paris, modernism in the Philippines was filtered through a particular local, commonly shared sensibility that was both romantic and respectful of traditions.

In fact, there was no direct influence of the Paris styles or of the modernist paintings of Europe, for there was no chance of bringing these to the art public in Manila. There were, however, a few Filipino expatriates who were exposed to modern art before Edades appeared on the scene. The late nineteenth-century painter, Juan Luna, in his correspondence with José Rizal mentioned having gone to an impressionist exhibit, since the first impressionist exhibit with Monet's "Impression: Sunrise" was held in 1874. Although his major works were in the European academic style, such as his *Spoliarium*, which won the first gold medal in the Madrid Exposition of 1884, Luna did informal paintings in Europe that showed the influence of impressionism with its casual air and its concern for the effects of light on objects. This influence, however, was not disseminated to Philippine artists at the time; his last works, portraits of kin, which he did in the Philippines were mostly in a decorous conservative style. Another Filipino artist, Juan Arellano, a student of architecture in Europe in the early twentieth century, left a body of paintings that showed both impressionist and fauvist influence in their bold use of color. He was, however, highly individualist and did not strive to influence the course of Philippine art.



## The Role of Edades

Victorio Edades burst onto the scene with a one-man show of paintings at the Philippine Columbian Club in 1928. As painter and teacher, it was Edades who courageously took it upon himself to bring the message of modernism to Filipino artists. He assumed the role of mediator between the modernist movement in Europe and Philippine art, which was then immersed in the idyllic images of the Amorsolo School. In fact, Edades' exposure to modernism was limited; he himself was trained in a modern American art academy and his actual exposure to the works of the School of Paris was confined primarily to the traveling Armory Show. But despite his exposure being so limited, his encounter with modernism was marked by great enthusiasm on his part, and it was an encounter that changed not only his own artistic career but the whole course of Philippine art in the succeeding decades.

Edades' campaign for modern art consisted mainly of several articles on the subject that he wrote for publications. In these he argued the cause of modern art before hostile academics and supporters of the Amorsolo School. Apart from the general theoretical basis of modern art, which he patiently explained, there were few books on modern art with colored plates that could provide visual instruction. But one important activity that linked his theory with practice consisted of his collaborative paintings and architectural designs with three of the most promising artists, for Edades' assiduous campaign drew the interest and attention of a progressive sector of art patrons who commissioned him to do work for theater lobbies and residences. Edades seized this as an opportunity to form his first group, the Triumvirate, consisting of Carlos Francisco, Galo B. Ocampo, and himself, which became the nucleus of the modernist movement in the Philippines. Their collaborative murals and decorative designs featured Art Nouveau-inspired stylized dancing figures in flowing curvilinear lines, often against a background of tropical vegetation. On the whole, Filipino artists improvised on modernism, thereby creating original modernist idioms that did not adhere closely to the styles of the School of Paris.

Edades geared his campaign along artistic and cultural issues particular to the Philippines. Recognizing the strong influence of classical ideals that were linked to a general conservative outlook, he rightly distinguished between classicism and academic art. He emphasized that modernism did not devalue the great masterpieces of classical art; it was rather academism, the mechanical repetition of formulas, that needed to be overthrown. Such a position succeeded in winning over the urban elite acquainted with the works of the Renaissance masters da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. He considered Amorsolo "a competent artist" but believed that an openness toward new idioms was required to renew Philippine art.

It was also Edades who defined modernism within the parameters of the quest for national identity. The modernist project was not the copying of foreign models; rather, it involved stylistic experimentation with research into indigenous artistic sources in order to enrich the new art. Edades pointed to the example of the Mexicans in developing a country's national identity in art



within modernist idioms.

In fact, the theme of indigenous culture came from the influence of Gauguin with his Tahitian paintings celebrating the "gold of their bodies" and their social context of religion and ritual. Edades did a small painting of two Igorot women in a flat Gauguinesque manner. For while modernism was indeed of European origin, it contained within it a recognition and appreciation of non-Western cultures, as in the Japanese woodcuts that influenced impressionist composition and the African masks that influenced cubism.

### Points of Debate

There remained several points of debate between the conservatives and the moderns, and these were spread out through a period of dialogues in the press. It was the sculptor Guillermo Tolentino rather than the painter Amorsolo who took issue with the emerging forces. He upheld the classical canons of beauty, harmony, and proportion: in the context of the academy, art was to be universal and timeless, above human struggle and strife, and thus not reflecting contemporary life but an eternal ideal in Plato's realm of universal and immutable ideas. Art was a privileged practice, the domain of a select gifted few. And for Amorsolo, art was romantic nostalgia for a mythic past frozen for all eternity.

As against the classical concept of beauty, Edades affirmed modernist expressiveness of form in which the terrible and the ugly had their place. Tolentino strongly opposed the use of distortion, which he considered antithetical to art. Drawing his argument from folk belief, he said that he would not show the work of the modernists to a pregnant woman since this risked her producing a deformed child. Edades likewise asserted the primacy of design in art, the specificity of the artistic language, to a public that approached art through a pleasing subject that confirmed their expectations and values and maintained the *status quo*.

Despite the limited circumstances, Edades had a sufficient general grasp of the concept of modernism. In his articles, he argued for modernism in order to open a new space for it with growing public acceptance. Yet, the basic issues underlying the transition from classicism to modernism were not sufficiently problematized. It was assumed that after overcoming the initial resistance of the conservatives, modernism would take root naturally and unproblematically, like shedding one garment for another. The emphasis lay mainly on stylistic change influenced by the School of Paris rather than on the ideas that informed this change. Thus, there was an insufficient perception of art as a continual grappling with artistic and intellectual/ideological issues. It elided the dynamic interrogative role of the intellect in modernism, in which the creation of art was not merely the search for original form but was also accompanied by the expansion of art theory and asserted that with the opening of the brave new horizons that modernism made possible, artistic practice, liberated from academic formula, was continually linked with theory both in a general and a specific manner. All in all, it was assumed that modernism, once its basic concepts were sufficiently

grasped and accepted locally, could be easily transported from Europe to the Philippines. There was thus glossing over of important differences in the social and historical conditions that significantly overdetermine the manifestations of modern art in another country.

It was this particular flaw that brought with it the hazard of innocently and blissfully making art after foreign models without a consciousness of the complex and important mediations of history and material conditions that must underlie this process. This opened the way to the syndrome of the "mainstream," in which local artistic practice, considering itself but a tributary, strove to join the main course that thundered mightily in Paris and later in New York. Reflecting the economic power relations, artists of the "periphery" gravitated toward a cosmopolitan center of artistic plenitude which alone could accord them recognition and fame. Such a tendency paved the way for the artistic and cultural domination by the One, centered in the industrial capitals of the West, of the Other, a country "of the periphery" in Asia — a domination which is reproduced in the economic and political spheres and which contemporary liberation movements have since attempted to overthrow.

An offshoot of the debate between the conservatives and the modernists was the firming up of the relationship between the painters and the literati. This symbiotic exchange led to the first critiques and serious writings on art, particularly the visual arts, contributing to the art discourse initiated by José Rizal in his speech on the occasion of the Madrid Exposition of 1884, in which Luna and Hidalgo won awards. The participation of writers lent a larger dimension to the discussions and introduced free theorizing on art, hitherto stifled by academism. It was the poet José Garcia Villa, known for championing modernism in poetry, who also took up the modernist cause in the visual arts. He carried formalism in art beyond Edades' basic formulations. Needless to say, the ferment occasioned by the lively intellectual exchange served to favor the cause of modern art and brought in an increasing number of adherents who had been stimulated by the debate.

#### **Trends in the 1930s and the 1940s**

It was the decades of the Thirties to the outbreak of the Second World War that saw the development of modernism in the Philippines. Modernism attracted the most promising young artists who were seeking a way out of the Amorsolo impasse. The Triumvirate of Edades-Galo Ocampo-Carlos Francisco extended to the Thirteen Moderns, which included Vicente Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, Romeo V. Tabuena, Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Hernando R. Ocampo, Purugganan, and others. It was in the Thirties that the quest for modernist idioms gained momentum. The association of the original modernist Triumvirate proved to be a most auspicious one for Philippine art. With faith in modernism as opposed to academic conservatism, the three launched a crusade with the brush and pen to stimulate artistic development along modernist lines. The inspired murals which the three did together — early works in interaction — for the lobbies of the Capitol



and State theaters in 1934 were an expression of their new artistic credo allied with nationalistic themes at the height of the Commonwealth period.

One of the leading modernists, Carlos Francisco, never severed his links with the grassroots in his hometown of Angono in Rizal province. Drawing inspiration from the lifeways of the folk, he was able to develop one of the most felicitous directions in Philippine modernism. It was his particular insight to create a synthesis of modernism and Philippine indigenous aesthetics. It was in his work that modernism was indigenized, taking root in the local context. Rather than linear perspective, he used a spatial composition that satisfied the folk penchant for covering the entire visual field with multifarious elements. Instead of modeling forms to convey the illusion of volume, he flattened his shapes, enhancing curvilinear designs and rhythms, and used light, fresh colors thinly applied on the canvas. This coincided with the modernist assertion of the two-dimensionality of the pictorial plane and the renewal of color, and, more importantly, of the demystification of the traditional assumption of painting as an illusion of reality and its rediscovery as a construct and invention of the artist. It was a form that was eminently suitable to his subjects taken from the folk, their occupations, and rituals, as well as from the social values that these conveyed. Filipino, too, is his sense of the communal life: the crowds of people in interaction as they engage in trade, revel in fiestas, or unite in common struggles. Carlos Francisco's studio in Angono was open to promising young artists; it became the nucleus of a flourishing school and, even after his death, he was a model for regional artists working in the folk genre in the Laguna Lakeshore area, such as José Blanco, also in Angono; Tam Austria in Tanay; and many other artists and art groups in different parts of the country, such as Negros and Cebu.

### **The Main Postwar Issues and Trends**

In the wake of the Second World War, the granting of independence to the Philippines by the United States occasioned ferment on the cultural scene. Writers and artists set themselves the task of defining and sharpening the lineaments of Philippine culture and art. Independence spurred the creation of a post-colonial discourse. But again, the current term "post-colonial" should not serve as a smoke screen for the neo-colonial reality in which formal colonial ties are ostensibly severed in order to give way to a more insidious because covert form of domination in the economic, political, and cultural spheres.

The rise of nationalism in the postwar decades originated from the perception that vigilance was necessary against continuing American intervention, which sought to keep the Philippines in a condition of perpetual tutelage. In relation to the colonial experience, nationalism in the Philippines was essentially anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in content. However, during the Marcos regime, it was articulated into a rightist authoritarian discourse that sought to unify the people in terms of a common "spirit" (*diwa*) and cultural heritage. At the same time, the mass-protest movement articulated nationalism with its anti-imperialist content with a liberative pro-



people agenda.

With the granting of formal independence, the quest for cultural identity spearheaded by intellectuals and artists brought up certain aspects of Philippine culture. A new interest in indigenous and non-Hispanic culture emerged. The *okir* designs of the Muslim Filipinos of Mindanao came into focus, together with the artistic expressions of the Cordillera and other groups. Needless to say, these arts suffered a long period of marginalization. During the Spanish colonial period, they were destroyed and condemned as heathen works; to American colonial scholars in search of exotica they bore an anthropological and ethnographic interest and were integrated into Orientalist academic disciplines.

Intellectuals focused the issue of cultural identity on the field of indigenous culture and living traditions of the indigenous Filipinos. Some over-enthusiastically asserted that this was the authentic identity that Filipinos should regain. Yet, such a static definition of identity disregards the historical process and the fact that a people's identity is constantly shaped by the dual movements of resistance and reaffirmation.

There were also those who foregrounded the "Spanish colonial heritage," from the *ilustrado* elite point of view which saw colonialism as the bringer of Christianity in the white man's *misión civilisatrice*. But the Catholic religion as it was adapted in the country had a rich overlay of folk belief and ritual. And there is also the fact that the Catholic faith was far from propagated in an innocent and altruistic way, for it served to make colonial oppression acceptable as the will of God.

But in all these, the concept of national identity was largely unproblematicized. It was primarily presumed to be a metaphysical and ahistorical essence that one could discover by means of an archaeological excavation into the cumulative detritus of earlier influences. It was also presumed to be a seamless whole in which all members of society found inspiration and edification. Such a concept of national identity, and indeed of national culture, inevitably glossed over the conflicts and dissensions of society, so that the myth of a homogeneous identity became a tool in the service of the dominant interests.

It was against such cultural issues that the struggle for modernism was resumed with greater energy after the war. In its break with the closed Eurocentrism of the Academy, the modernism of the School of Paris also brought to the fore certain non-European strains that helped to validate modernism in an Asian country like the Philippines, given the fact that modernism was born, to a certain extent, from the fruitful interaction between European and non-European cultures, such as the African, Japanese, Chinese, and South Pacific, thus giving recognition to the active aspect and spiritual power of these cultures. And while modernism was born in West Europe, it was likewise fertilized by East European contributions, as in Chagall and the Ballets Russes, and by the pre-Roman arts of the Iberian peninsula. Art thus considerably expanded, integrating a large number of other mediums, including pottery, masks, and totems.



### Leading Postwar Modernists

The struggle for modernism that Edades inspired was resumed by the original Triumvirate and the Thirteen Moderns. Carlos Francisco created his definitive modernist works in several murals. His first important mural was done for the 1953 International Fair held in Manila. On the theme of "Five Hundred Years of Philippine History," its scope covered the legendary origin of the Filipino with the first man and woman, *Malakas at Maganda*, springing from the primal bamboo up to the contemporary administration of then incumbent President Quirino. The lasting masterpiece of Carlos Francisco consists of the mural series he did for the Manila City Hall. This mural of the history of Manila, from the first great Rajahs of Tondo, through the Spanish colonial period, Balagtas, Rizal, and the Revolution of 1896 up to the American period, illustrates the history of the entire nation itself. In his work, the artist often integrated several historical vignettes with emphasis on one central episode and the secondary ones around it on a smaller scale. The episodes, however, are not static, but flow into each other by means of linking devices such as a winding river, flames branching out, or clouds coiling in spirals. The murals are likewise marked by an artistic vigor and inexhaustible inventiveness, a lively characterization of the numerous historical personages, and unifying all, an admirable sense of modernist design.

The third member of the Triumvirate, Galo B. Ocampo, was also concerned with creating a Filipino modernist idiom. The war was a theme that continued to haunt the artist through the Fifties. In his Flagellant series, the images of Christ's passion are reinterpreted through images of war in a surrealist technique. In one, Christ, crowned with thorns and wearing a flagellant's hood, stands with arms bound together while warplanes fly in the skies. In another work, a devotee lies prostrate, his arms forming a cross on the ground, while the shadows of warplanes are reflected on the sand. These paintings in predominantly brown tones convey the feeling of a wasteland, littered with the debris of war. But it was only in 1973, at the age of fifty-nine, that Galo B. Ocampo held his first one-man show. For this exhibit he produced a new series in which he paid tribute to the Tabon Man, the oldest human fossil found in the country. His field work in Palawan inspired him with images of the early Filipino: Adam and Eve growing from the ancient stalagmites and reflecting the everchanging hues of the mysterious caves.

It was only in the postwar years that leading artists, such as Vicente Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, and Romeo Tabuena, had a first-hand exposure through brief stints in Paris art schools. Manansala, for instance, did further training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Montreal, Canada, in the United States, and in France where he had a brief stint under Ferdinand Leger.

Shunning Amorsolo's rural idylls, Manansala developed a new imagery based on postwar urban realities. He came out strongly in the 1950s with such works as *Madonna of the Slums* and paintings of jeepneys. The city of Manila through the vision of the artist had a strong folk color in its street vendors and Quiapo devotees with all the symbols of a folk culture. Besides paintings of mother-and-child, his subjects included jeepneys, *barong-barong*, cockfighters, families gathering together for a modest meal, and Quiapo women vendors of candles, novenas, scapulars, and food. His women



vendors sit veiled and hunched over their wares, their brown impassive faces like the indigenous *bulol*, or Cordillera guardian figures, blocklike with broad planes, their large bare feet projecting from the hems of their skirts.

It may be said that Manansala indigenized cubism and developed the style of transparent cubism that was generally shared by his fellow Neo-Realists Cesar Legaspi and Romeo Tabuena. The cubist aspect of Manansala's work rests largely in the geometric faceting of forms and in the shifting and overlapping of planes. But in his work, the facets and planes are broader and bring out larger rhythms than in the original cubist style. He often incorporated linear decorative patterns, like the ironwork curlicues of gates and windows. Unlike analytical cubism, which arbitrarily fragmented and dissected the figure into complex abstract elements, Manansala stayed close to the figure, which was simplified to its basic geometric shape. In composition, his works often indicate lines of perspective, but recession in depth is simultaneously denied by lines and planes creating spatial ambiguities.

Manansala's vision of the city and his native Filipino approach to his subjects would influence numerous artists who would take up his folk themes within an urban context. Among the artists who show his influence are Mauro Malang Santos, with his own version of folk romanticism in paintings that convey the fragile, makeshift character of the Fifties, and others from the University of Santo Tomas, where Manansala taught for a time, such as Antonio Austria, Angelito Antonio, and Mario Parial. Others include Manuel Baldemor, whose roots are in Paete, Laguna, as well as some Laguna lakeshore artists.

Cesar Legaspi also pursued art studies abroad as a scholar of the Cultura Hispanica in Madrid from 1953 to 1954 and subsequently entered the Academie Ranson in Paris. In Legaspi, the rigorous intellectual approach of the analytical phase of cubism gave way to the more harmonious aspect of its synthetic phase. There is in his work a faceting of the figures into larger planes that overlap and cut through space in transparent curvilinear rhythms and that achieve a textured orchestration of hues and tones. His early paintings of the period immediately before and after the war reflected the themes of the time. *Man and Woman* (also entitled *Beggars*), painted in 1945 in an expressionist idiom involving distortion, shows a couple in rags finding shelter in the skeletons of buildings that resemble surrealist sculptures. *Gadgets* reflects the increasing importance of machines in the life of the postwar industrializing period, with the insidious threat of man's metamorphosis into machine.

In his later works of the mid-Sixties, the cubist idiom is significantly modified by rhythmic curvilinear line and planes in contrast to the angularity of his original style. From 1974 his paintings became more chromatic; layers of transparent passages create prismatic effects. Figures dynamically cut through space in gestural movements. Light enhances color and form or dematerializes and dissolves them into airy transparencies creating resonances in space.

Through the Seventies and Eighties, Legaspi produced paintings dealing with universal human themes, such as *The Survivor*. These large, heroic canvases convey the surging, straining movements of human beings in aspiration, struggle, and triumph done in his dynamic style. The human figure



in its well-articulated muscular and structural frame becomes an eloquent vehicle for expression, while a tension ensues between organic form and geometric structure, transparency, and solidity, the flexible and the inexorable. In 1976 he did a number of multi-layered paintings on wood panel to give actual depth and shadows to the illusion of spatial movement.

A self-taught painter, Hernando R. Ocampo was a member of the Thirteen Moderns and the Neo-Realists. His significance in the context of modernism was the fact that he created an original Philippine abstraction that bore little relation to the School of Paris. His initiation to modernism coincided with his proletarian period, which reflected the debate in the Thirties between "proletarian art" and "art-for-art's-sake," also an issue in the United States during the Depression years. His paintings showed the stark realities of the time and the wide class gap in society. His later works became increasingly stylized and showed a growing abstraction in their primary concern for design, color, and texture.

Shifting to abstraction, most of his work of the Sixties belongs to the mutant period, which derived inspiration from a science-fiction fantasy on strange forms spewed forth by nuclear explosions. In the visual melody period, he brought back tonalities into his abstract designs of organic shapes, creating a richer form of abstraction. An example of this style is *Genesis*, which was executed into a tapestry for the main theater of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Its central motif is a bright flame that casts oscillating shadows and reflections on the surrounding design of red and yellow elements.

### **From Paris to New York**

After the war, however, the artistic center of gravity shifted from Paris to New York. The United States had suffered the least damage and gained the most advantage from the war as it emerged as the new superpower. As such, it assumed a new role as international arbiter of art. This was of particular significance to the Philippines, being its former colony.

While the U.S. Federal Arts project had supported a wide range of art during the Depression years, the artists of the New York School of abstract expressionism, mainly Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, won critical favor over the regionalists and social realists, such as Ben Shahn and Ralph Soyer. The aesthetics that emerged out of the Cold War and McCarthyism promoted an art of kinetic energy and direct gestural expression devoid of social significations. This American brand of fashionable modernism dominated the art scene of the Fifties. Unlike but parallel to it was the geometric abstraction of Josef Albers, an expatriate from Germany, as was the painterly and equally formalist Hans Hoffmann, both influential figures in the postwar period.

The modernist recognition of the specificity of art extended, in the American context, to formalism and the absolute autonomy of art. Art, viewed as a pure and autonomous realm, was to be protected from the political, which in this aesthetic ideology had the nature of an undesirable polluting influence. The powerful human emotions and passions unleashed by the recent war, such



as protest, guilt, and questioning doubt, were to be kept away from the domain of art, as they had the dangerous potential of a Pandora's box. These had no place in a superpower's agenda.

The United States eagerly sought to maintain its role as tutor and cultural arbiter of its erstwhile colony, the Philippines. It could not have had a more propitious time to play the part. In the postwar Fifties, the myth of the United States as the liberator of the Philippines made the Filipinos particularly receptive to its imperialist designs. For one, the United States did not wish to lose the important gains it made in education with the establishment of the public-school system using English as the medium of instruction. It thus instituted a program of post-baccalaureate scholarships in order to attract the best graduates to earn their higher degrees in American universities. In the visual arts, the principal schools were the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, the Pratt Graphic Art Center in New York.

Modernism in the Philippines thus began its second phase with the arrival of José Joya from Cranbrook and Constancio Bernardo from Yale, both of them immediately given teaching posts in the University of the Philippines. The first group of modernists, including the Triumvirate and the Thirteen Moderns, worked under the influence of Edades in a modernism influenced by the School of Paris. In contrast, the new breed derived their art from the influential American art trends of the time, primarily abstract expressionism or gestural painting, and secondarily, geometric abstraction that harked back to the Bauhaus studies in optical perception. In the later Fifties, Joya did strong, gestural paintings of kinetic impulse. Obviously influenced by Pollock's art, his work, however, showed a difference in composition, which tended to have an asymmetrical, off-center quality rather than the even layering of pigment found in Pollock. This asymmetrical quality in Joya's work reflects certain concerns of traditional Asian aesthetics, as in the obliqueness of Zen and its energy-filled space. Another difference, apart from his earlier monochromatic works, is the hedonistic use of color, where pigment is not just neutral or "objective" medium, but subjective and linked to feeling and pleasure. As he moved away from the influence of the New York School, his abstract paintings explored the subtle harmonies of color and from kinetic gesturalism turned more and more tranquil, rounded forms massed together, whether in oil paintings or in acrylic/rice paper collages that bear faint allusions to nature.

Another abstractionist, Constancio Bernardo, completed graduate work in fine arts in Yale in 1952. In his case, the dominant influences in American art came from European expatriate artists, such as Josef Albers and Hans Hoffmann. He had worked in series, combining geometrism and color research, in works that clearly continue the legacy of Albers. Although Bernardo's paintings were of high technical excellence, their intellectual/ideological underpinnings were laid down a priori in a different cultural context and were not of his own making. Bernardo influenced directly or indirectly such abstractionists as Lee Aguinaldo, Allan Cosio, and Impy Pilapil.

It was in the mid-Fifties, that the avant-grade made its striking appearance. This was in the person of the enfant terrible David Cortez Medalla, painter, sculptor, and poet. Influenced by European, particularly French, artistic developments, he pioneered experimental kinetic, and performance art in defiance of traditional academic norms. He did portraits deconstructing the



subject by their spontaneous and irrational approach, rejecting volume and instead stressing the two-dimensionality of the picture plane. His few paintings show affinities with "primitive" and children's art, with the distinct influence of dadaism and *art brut*, and at the same time they mock the seriousness of high art and recuperate the element of play. The influence of *art brut* is seen in the scratching or graffito technique, which produces irregular outlines and mottled textures. However, it was for his kinetic sculpture, such as the bubble-spewing machine, that he won recognition abroad.

The artistic contribution of Medalla paved the way for the emergence of conceptual art, which was avant-garde spearheaded by Ray Albano and Roberto Chabet. Its practitioners were associated with the Cultural Center of the Philippines, of which Albano was then the artistic director, at the same time that Lucrecia Kasilag, avant-garde composer, was in her heyday.

### Current Trends

The earlier debate between "art-for-art's-sake" and "proletarian art," which involved not only the visual arts but more especially poetry and fiction, had its continuing repercussions in later art. The proponent of proletarian art was the essayist Salvador P. Lopez in his *Literature and Society*, while the position of "art-for-art's-sake" was espoused by the poet José Garcia Villa, who had also been a champion of modernism. "Proletarian art" with its social commentary was a response to the postwar squalor, as seen in the early works of Hernando R. Ocampo, Cesar Legaspi, and Vicente Manansala, but as the wounds of war healed, they shed it without second thoughts and pursued other artistic directions.

The Sixties saw the emergence of a brilliant breed of younger artists who tackled social issues with artistic verve. This generation of modernists counted among them Ang Kiukok, Ben Cabrera, Danilo Dalena, and Onib Olmedo. They brought modernism to its full flowering in a multiplicity of personal styles; furthermore, they made it flexible and responsive to local conditions as they drew their material from contemporary Philippine life and history. In the Sixties, modernism had become fully appropriated and indigenized.

The Sixties also saw new developments in sculpture and printmaking. From Napoleon Abueva, a pioneer in modernism in sculpture, to Eduardo Castrillo, Solomon Sapid, and Ramon Orlina, along with Allan Cosio and Impty Pilapil, new sculptural concepts were contributed by leading sculptors. To the traditional media of stone, wood, and metal were added chrome plexiglass, and studio glass, in modules, mobiles and assemblages.

Since the Seventies, the descendants of "proletarian art" have been known as social realists who often point to their illustrious forebears, H.R. Ocampo, Legaspi, and Manansala. A closer look, however, will reveal important points of difference between the two generations. On one hand, the first-generation artists were only responding as sensitive individuals to the poverty and social inequality that they observed around them. On the other hand, the core of the social realists, the



*Kaisahan* (Unity) group founded around 1976 during the martial rule of former president Marcos, was a political artists' group linked to the radical mass movement for social change. Of a higher political/ideological consciousness, they did not remain on a naive, purely cultural form of nationalism nor on a limited reform program of social justice but one that articulated nationalism into a radical discourse that advanced the interests of the proletariat and peasantry. The themes taken up by the social realists such as feminism and environmentalism, were situated within the context of the large movement for change. Beyond its social comment and protest, social realism had a utopian moment, a vision of a human order of genuine democracy and freedom for all.

Social realism, however, was not one figurative style but many different styles showing diverse influences, such as surrealism and expressionism, with realism as only one style among them. Some paintings such as those of Edgar Fernandez, had a symbolic complexity. In the hands of the leading social realists, such as Renato Habulan, social realism acquired a semiotic richness derived from the different aspects of contemporary experience. This was also true in the case of the work of José Tence Rufz who contributed an experimental, avant-garde aspect to the movement.

Apart from the social realists of the *Kaisahan* group, many artists took up social and political themes, especially in the latter part of the Marcos period, which was marked by increasing suppression and militarization. The nationalist viewpoint gained currency among many artists. But social realism had a wider influence beyond its political content. For instance, it developed the use of popular forms, such as the comics, illustrations, editorial cartoons, and portable murals to reach a wider public, thus breaking down elitist prejudice against these forms, which were demonstrated, by outstanding examples, to have their own standards of excellence. It spearheaded the search for alternative exhibition spaces, such as campuses, parks, and churches, outside the regular galleries. It encouraged art, not only the visual arts, but also music and theater, at the grass-roots level beyond the urban centers as a vehicle for the expression to the people's sentiments. It thus widened the public of art, from the traditional Manila circuit to the local regions, thus significantly enhancing the vitality of art in life.

A striking trend in Philippine art today is the use of indigenous materials, as best exemplified by the Baguio artists. For its sheer innovativeness, this trend projects itself as the new Philippine avant-garde. More importantly, it has displaced an earlier avant-garde, that consisted of the conceptual artists who had been associated with the late Ray Albano of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). This earlier "avant-garde" movement had cultivated a cosmopolitan tone; or if it had Philippine allusions, it took pride in a hermetic preciousness that had the character of an in-joke among a small elite circle of initiates. A number of their works, however, were redundancies of Marcel Duchamp's original gesture of "formalization" in which a banal object, like the famous urinal, is removed from its daily setting and situated in a gallery context. The more complex of their works blithely combined different forms and media from "high art" (painting) and "low art" (comics) in a leveling, "post-modern" way. Yet, in a sense, the Orientalizing mode was at work in these productions, for they proffered myths of the Filipino subjectivity as inscrutable, solipsistic, obscure, and therefore of eminently exotic fare.



The trend in indigenous materials, doubtless, has a clearly positive, salutary aspect. Because the works are not made of academic materials associated with museums and formal art situations, the art experience breaks down the alienation of the ordinary viewer before a work of art that is now made of accessible, familiar materials from the environment and initiates a fluid circulation of exchange between the work and the viewer. Furthermore, the use of indigenous materials demonstrates that the creation of art is possible without a dependence on expensive, imported materials. There is likewise the challenge to artistic ingenuity that these materials bring, as well as a sense of being in close touch with one's natural environment.

Art from indigenous materials may take the form of disparate objects, such as tapestries, as in the work of Paz Abad Santos, which draw inspiration from indigenous sources. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya uses folk elements for their semiotic significations. Some works using vines, seedpods, and other organic elements are arranged or constructed with clear mimetic intentions, as in works of Junyee. However, the use of indigenous materials can also take the form of installations that inevitably imply social contexts. As installations, they may project the subjectivity of the artist who takes on the role of shaman/high priest/healer, and it is here that the problems begin. Discrepancies and tensions may arise between the installation artist, usually of urban petty-bourgeois background, and the indigenous social community, as, for instance, the Cordillera mountain groups. The active appropriation of cultural elements from an ordinarily passive source poses problems in itself. For would this not constitute a transgression, a foraging into sensitive cultural zones, in the interest of presenting a spectacle, a theatrical happening to regale fellow outsiders to the community? Would not this likewise constitute an added exploitation of indigenous Filipinos who have long since suffered marginalization by dominant Christian groups? There is the ever-present hazard of distorting or trivializing traditions. To rule out bad faith, it thus becomes essential for the artist to seriously examine the nature of his artistic relationship with the indigenous community, so that his work does not take the form of an imposition on its members or an exploitation or violation of their sensitivities. And this brings us back to the potency of issues in art, which cannot just proceed along its merry way, avoiding confrontations.

Certainly, the trend in indigenous materials is not ideologically neutral. At the base, it can have a generally nationalist, that is, anti-colonial character, because it foregrounds the values of the local environment, natural and social. But it can also go to the ideological extreme of nativism, of a zealously guarded subjectivity that excludes all that is not part of it, a nativism that romanticizes the precolonial past and situates, indeed imprisons, the Filipino in that past, resurrecting its mythic gods and goddesses as the true and authentic religion. But cultural identity is a problematic concept that must reckon with a diversity of contributions. Never completed once and for all, it is continually shaped by the historical process. Likewise, the artistic avant-garde of a country is not found elsewhere in the cosmopolitan centers of the West, but is developed on home grounds, forward-looking and progressive, constantly in quest of radical artistic languages that can carry through the formidable project of change.

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# Western-Style Painting in Japan and the Development of Modernism and Avant-Garde Art

Ozaki Masato

## 1. Initial Encounters with Western Painting Techniques

Before turning to the central theme of this essay, the influence of Western modernism on Japanese art, I would like to offer a brief summary of the reception of Western art in Japan down through the centuries.

The Japanese experience with Western painting dates back to the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573-1615). However, the Japanese experience of Western painting at that time was still very limited. After Francis Xavier (1506-1552), the founder of the Society of Jesus, arrived in Japan in 1549, genre paintings and religious art were brought into the country by numerous missionaries for the purposes of spreading the Christian faith. Records indicate that a Jesuit painter named Giovanni Nikolao (1560-1626) came to Japan in 1583, and that he disseminated Western painting techniques in Amakusa in Kyushu, as well as, instructing Japanese students in art at the Jesuit school in Nagasaki.

This period is referred to as the first phase of *yofuga*, or Western-style painting, which meant oil painting. It was also known as *namban-e*, or Southern Barbarian painting. Copying was the underlying objective during this initial period; the encounter did not lead to an understanding of Western painting. What is more, it had a negligible impact on traditional Japanese painters.

The first phase of *yofuga* died out in the mid-17th century. The second phase was triggered by the sudden emergence of the Akita School of Dutch painting in the latter half of the 18th century. This school was named after the region of Akita in Northern Honshu where it originated. In addition to the Akita School of Dutch painting, the second phase of *yofuga* includes the painting style that developed in Edo. The Edo School of Dutch painting is epitomized by Shiba Kokan (1747-1818); it also encompasses copperplate etchings produced by Aodo Denzen (1748-1822) and other artists. The second wave of *yofuga* in Nagasaki also occurred during this period.

In contrast to the first phase of *yofuga*, the paintings produced during this period display an understanding of Western oil painting, as artists fused Western painting techniques — such as perspective and modeling in light and shade — with traditional Japanese and Chinese pictorial methods. The practical attitude toward learning and the arts that characterized *rangaku*, or Dutch Studies, in Japan is said to have laid the groundwork for this new current. Whereas schematic elements inspired by Western lithographs known as *keikan shakuyo*, or "borrowed landscapes," are evident in the Akita School of Dutch painting, landscapes in the Edo School were drawn directly



from nature and creatively manipulated the sense of perspective. Because of their use of realistic perspective, these works are also significant as naturalist or empirical studies.

Artists from the late Tokugawa period (1603-1867) and the early years after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 who were influenced by Western painting include Takahashi Yuichi (1828-1894), Kawakami Togai (1827-1881), and Goseda Horyu (1827-1892). Western painting during this time as well was basically regarded as a practical science. The paintings of Takahashi and his fellow artists, however, were also based on a personal aesthetic concern for revealing the sense of awe and yearning they felt in regard to the accurate expression of reality; in other words, their preoccupation with faithfully representing objects. What sets this period apart from previous eras, is the fact that many of the artists had mentors who possessed first-hand knowledge of Western oil painting techniques, and the fact that many of the artists had also learned about photography.

Takahashi studies under the English illustrator Charles Wirgman (1835-1891) and the Italian art teacher Antonio Fontanesi (1818-1882), while Kawakami was taught by the wife of the Italian Raphael Shoia. Yokoyama Matsusaburo (1838-1884) studied Western painting under Leyman, a Russian journalist. He is also said to have studied Western painting and photography in Hong Kong and Batavia (now Jakarta). The painting academies later founded by these artists prospered owing to the zeal for Westernization that permeated the "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika*) movement at the beginning of the Meiji era (1868-1912).

The works by artists who adopted Western painting techniques during the late Tokugawa period and the beginning of the Meiji era sought to be exact reproductions of reality, or else fragmented depictions of the world that represented a slice of reality. The artists did not create new worlds within their paintings. The concern with objective reality was construed more in term of technique than perception. Even Takahashi devoted most of his career to paintings which functioned as utilitarian visual records and landscapes rendered with scientific precision.

With regard to the reception of Western painting on a social level, the first use of the term *abura-e* to refer to oil painting occurred at the 1st *Naikoku Kangyo Hakurankai* (National Industrial Exposition), held in 1877. *Yoga*, the modern term for Western painting, first appeared in a judge's critique at the 5th National Industrial Exposition, held in 1903. A department of Western painting was added to the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko, or Tokyo School of Fine Arts, in 1896.

The first international evaluation of oil paintings by Japanese artists took place at the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873. In addition to promoting the development of Western-style painting in line with the Meiji government's drive to Westernize Japan, the Vienna Exhibition sparked a movement to revive and preserve the traditional Japanese arts. One result was the creation of national industrial expositions which were largely for the purpose of preserving traditional Japanese arts and mostly rejected Western-style painting. Although this period also witnessed the transplanting of the institutional underpinnings of Western art, such as the opening of the Kobo Bijutsu Gakko, or Technical Fine Arts School, in 1876 and the establishment of the Department of Western Painting at Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1896, the reactionary times were hostile to the development of Western-style painting.



Overtime, Western-style painting became inextricably linked with the concept of *bijutsu*, or fine arts. This long process, which included the above-mentioned reactionary period, involved many trials and tribulations. Changes can be perceived in the government's policies toward Western-style painting. Western-style paintings were rejected at the 1st *Naioku Kaiga Kyoshinkai* (Exposition for the Promotion of Japanese Painting), held in 1882, since reactionary forces prevailed. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Imperial Household Agency, Western painting was treated as a form of natural history connected with the preservation of antiques. Under the auspices of the Ministries of Home Affairs, Finance, and Agriculture and Commerce, Western-style painting was looked upon as an industrial skill, whose purpose was to increase production. In the end, the Department of Western-style Painting was added to the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1896.

By the time that Japanese artists were allowed to enter Western-style paintings at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1890, Western painting techniques had begun to find a permanent home in government educational policy under the mantle of fine arts. Twenty-seven years had passed since the last entry of Japanese oil paintings at a world exhibition. By this time, *bijutsu*, the Japanese rendering for the German term *kunst* used at the Vienna exhibition, was closer in meaning to its present-day use denoting the fine arts in general.

## 2. Transplanting Academism and Modernism

In the generation after pioneers such as Takahashi, who had to grope in the dark to acquire oil painting techniques, a number of Japanese artists actually studied oil painting on Western soil—for instance, in France and Germany. Circumstances in Japan forced the artists to study abroad. An outlet for mastering oil painting was finally created in 1876, when the Technical Fine Arts School was founded as part of the Kōbu Daigaku, or University of Technology. However, this was the same time when nationalism swept the country in reaction to Westernization, and movements were launched to preserve tradition and reject Western painting.

Ironically, the very same Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873 which had brought about the revival of oil painting also sparked this new trend. The warm reception accorded the Japanese arts and crafts at the Exhibition provided an opportunity to resuscitate the traditional arts at home. When the word *geijutsu* was used to denote a museum department in 1876, traditional crafts such as swords, *maki-e* lacquerware, crafts, textiles, and tea utensils were included in that category as art works, or *bijutsu hin*, whereas the crafts section containing everyday industrial goods was placed in a different category.

The late 1870s and 1880s were a low point for Western-style painting in terms of the educational system as well as the industrial and economic systems. The new reform movement in Japanese painting (*nihonga*), led by Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913), or Tenshin as he is commonly known in Japan, and Ernest Fenollosa (1862-1913) contributed to the nationalist movement by advocating respect for traditional Japanese art (*bijutsu*), as opposed to literati painting, or *bunjinga*, and oil painting.



Amid this fervor for traditional Japanese art, the Technical Fine Arts School attracted students who had returned from studying abroad, beginning with Yamamoto Hosui (1850-1906) who studied with Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) in 1877. Goseda Yoshimatsu (1855-1915) worked under the French academic painter Léon Joseph Florentin Bonnat (1833-1923) in 1880, and Matsuoka Hisashi (1862-1944) studied with Cesare Maccari at the National Academy of Art in Rome. One student who did not attend the Technical Fine Arts School, Harada Naojiro (1863-1899), studied with Gabriel Cornelius von Max (1810-1915) at the Munich Academy.

In 1866, Kuroda Seiki (1866-1924) and Kume Keiichiro (1866-1934) learned how to render daylight scenes and analyze light under the tutelage of Louis Joseph Raphaël Collin (1850-1916), a member of the *plein-air* school, whose adherents consisted of academic painters who had assimilated Impressionist ideas. After Kuroda and Kume returned to Japan with their newly acquired knowledge, members of the *Hakuba Kai*, or White House Society, including Okada Saburosuke (1869-1939), Shirataki Ikunosuke (1873-1960), and Wada Eisaku (1874-1959), also followed them to Collin's studio.

On the other hand, members of the *Taihei Yoga Kai*, Pacific Painting Society, an offshoot of the *Meiji Bijutsu Kai*, or Meiji Art Society, which had been led by Yamamoto Hosui, Goseda Yoshimatsu, and Matsuoka Hisashi, transplanted the stiff materials and thick pigments of Jean-Paul Laurens (1838-1921), which were more characteristic orthodox academism than of the *plein-air* school. The *Taihei Yoga Kai* included Nakamura Fusetsu (1866-1943), Mitsutani Kunishiro (1874-1936), and Kanokogi Takeshiro (1874-1941). At first, the members of this school and its forerunner, the Meiji Art Society, were locked in a power struggle with the White Horse Society to dominate the painting world. The differences between the two camps, however, were leveled around the start of the Taisho era (1912-1926) by the Ministry of Education Fine Arts Exhibition (*Bunten*) and its successor, the Exhibition of the Imperial Fine Arts Academy (*Teiten*), which blunted the conflict between the two camps and promoted the larger cause of art in general.

When artists who had just returned from Europe produced Western-style paintings that did not meet *Bunten* guidelines, artists linked to the *Bunten* formed an academic circle around the government-sponsored exhibition, while advocates of Post-Impressionism and other new movements rebelled against the *Bunten* and founded an opposition group, the modernist *Nika Kai*, or Second Division Society (of Western-style art). The founding of *Nika* in 1914 marked the birth of activities by art groups that consisted of a collection of individuals, as opposed to art that has been determined by educational policies backed by government-sponsored exhibitions such as the *Bunten* and *Teiten*.

Unlike the period in which knowledge about art was disseminated in classrooms and exhibitions as part of the government's educational strategy, new art trends began to be introduced in magazines as well. After the literary magazine *Myôjô*, or Venus, which provided the underpinnings for Romanticism in the Meiji era, folded in 1908, its mission ended, but *Subaru* (Pleiades) and *Shirakaba* (White Birch) were launched after it in rapid succession. The famous essay "Midori Iro no Taiyo" (Green Sun) by Takamura Kotaro (1883-1956) was published in *Subaru*. Known as Japan's "Impressionist Manifesto," the essay extolled the virtue of the individual and called for absolute



freedom of artistic expression. *Shirakaba* published special issues on Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), and Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919). From its beginning in 1910 to the formation of *Nika* in 1914, the magazine played a crucial role in disseminating knowledge about Post-Impressionism and encouraging subjective artistic expression.

In 1912, the first year of the Taisho era, an exhibition of the newly-founded *Fusankai*, or Sketching Society, was held. In a review of the exhibition, the poet and playwright Kinoshita Mokutaro (1885-1945) linked the show with the *Blaue Reiter* movement founded by Wassily Kandinsky (1886-1944) and others in Munich in 1911. Kinoshita characterized the exhibition as manifesting an "antinaturalist tendency." In fact, many of the pictures were not content with just representing the natural world. Some paintings manifested a Fauvist influence, reflecting trends that emerged after Impressionism. Especially noteworthy is the fact that nearly all of the participants in the exhibition were young artists unknown in painting circles. The artists represented in the exhibition were a collection of disparate individuals rather than members of the same art school or art study group. However, transplanting respect for the individual in Japan using Western art as a norm also brought with it the curse of formalism, when artists flocked to a new style and adapted themselves to it. As a result, some modernist art ended up as a mere shell of the real thing. Moreover, in the process of being transplanted, distinct styles intermixed, causing hybrid styles to emerge that displayed new directions or developments.

### 3. Importing and Experiencing Avant-Garde Art

If the *Nika* Society's modernism was triggered by the Fauvist movement, it in turn launched a new style dubbed "the new art of the Taisho era." The art world saw the production of Expressionist pictures such as *Ratai bijin* (Reclining Woman), which Yorozu Tetsugoro (1885-1927) had painted as a graduation project at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1912, and *Parasoru saseru onna* (Woman with Parasol) of 1916, a work by Togo Seiji (1897-1978) that exuded a Futurist expression of simultaneity and Cubist sense of modeling.

Although Togo had come in contact with the Futurist movement in Europe, he later turned to Cubism instead of Italian Futurism. His painting is executed in a style known as Cubo-Futurism, which fuses the two movements. Even Yorozu, whose experience with European art came indirectly from art magazines and books, employed a mixture of styles in which Expressionism and Fauvism were jumbled together in an often undigested manner. The reasons for this development are two-fold. On an external level, the introduction of new European styles in a very short period of time created stylistic confusion. Secondly, each individual artist picked and chose from the array of new artistic information according to his own specific needs and intentions, but never ended up developing a distinct style of modern art.

In any case, the jumbled reception of new art trends by these artists was translated into a desire to create a new kind of art movement that modernism was not fully capable of expressing. From this



emerges the "new art of the Taisho era," led by a small group of *Nika* related artists and other peripheral groups.

Not surprisingly, on the whole the styles pursued by Action, an Avant-Garde group launched by members of *Nika*, and by the *Miraiha Bijutsu Kyokai*, or Futurist Art Association, failed to differentiate between or fully assimilate different stylistic modeling concepts. The paintings' attempt to escape the two-dimensionality of the pictorial surface by creating an illusion of three-dimensionality, differs from the liberation from the flat surface which characterized Avant-Garde art in the narrow sense of the word.

The Japanese Avant-Garde movement sprang up at a time when Dadaism was gaining general acceptance in Berlin and Constructivism was emerging as a new trend. Although the *ishikiteki koseishugi*, or "conscious" Constructivism, personally defined by Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977) was never perfected, it represented his own development of a new artistic style. He was the very same artist who had originally proclaimed himself a Futurist, but when he saw Dadaism unfold before his eyes as a student in Berlin in 1922, he tried to create "conscious constructivism" by passing Constructivism through the filter of Dadaism, which served as an antithesis. However, he did not finish formulating his theory during his sojourn in Berlin. It was worked out in theoretical conversations with fellow members of MAVO, a Dadaist group, after Murayama's return to Japan. Aiming at art that emphasized form and eschewed two-dimensional planes, Murayama and his fellow members of the group used MAVO as a setting for developing fields of design, textiles, and advertising, transforming art from a personal into social enterprise.

Masterpieces produced by artists prominent in MAVO and peripheral movements include the abstract paintings Yanase Masamu (1900-1945), whose opposition to society was influenced by the German painter George Grosz (1893-1959); and the atomic series of Nakahara Minoru (1893-1990), who characterized his own pictures as "a scientist's theoretical paintings." Instead of merely copying new modes of representation, these artists created works on the basis of contemporary new paintings from the West. Thus these Western-style paintings were liberated, although not completely, from the long-standing bias in Japan in favor of Western artistic styles. Most academic painters, and all but a few modernist painters, however, remained restrained by Western painting styles.

Part of this new current in Taisho art was absorbed by Modernism, while the Avant-Garde element made a logical leap into the outlawed proletarian art movement, which had sprung up in conjunction with radical socialism and ideology. However, while Japanese artists were able to assimilate and reinterpret Western art idioms to suit their own artistic and political content, at the same time, they became less outward-looking and more insular.

During the first few years of the Showa era (1926-1989), another wave of Western art occurred. In 1929, Koga Harue (1895-1933) and Togo Seiji showed paintings at the 16th *Nika* Exhibition that displayed elements of Surrealism. But Koga's pictorial world was based on objective modeling that rejected subjectivity, an approach far removed from its source in French (Surrealism,) which extolled the virtues of visionary imagination and the unconscious. In Koga's hands, stereotyped Surrealist patterns and fantasies take on an independent existence.



The Surrealist movement gained momentum with the activities of *Dokuritsu Bijutsu Kyokai*, or Independent Art Association, founded in 1930. At the Association's first exhibition the following year, Fukuzawa Ichiro (1898-1993) displayed a collage which he had created, influenced by the work of Max Ernst (1871-1976), using a technique called *depaysement*. Many young painters were dazzled by this work which incorporated Surrealist techniques. Like Ernst, who had created a collage using illustrations clipped from the science journal *La Nature*, Fukuzawa used illustrations from Tom Tit's *La Science Amusante*. The use of this kind of Surrealist technique, however, was limited to Fukuzawa. As Koga's early Surrealist paintings show, works depicting cerebral fantasies became a fixed pattern in Japanese Surrealism.

The *Shin-Zokei Bijutsu Kyokai*, or New Formative-Arts Association, launched by members of the Independent Art Association, took Surrealism as its creed. With Takiguchi Shuzo (1903-1979) and Nakayama Chiriu (1905-1977) leading the way as theorists, a number of artists forged direct ties with André Breton (1896-1966).

Some paintings were transformed into Japanese-style Surrealist works through the use of mundane, traditional subjects. Hamamatsu Kogenta (1911-1943) pursued every day subjects such as marine life from the South Seas, ice-covered trees from northern climates, and tree stumps. Other artists who developed their own brand of Surrealism include Kitawaki Noboru (1901-1951), who looked for material in Oriental Zen and religious philosophy, and Komaki Gentaro (1906-1988), who drew upon folk religion.

Generally, however, Surrealist modes of representation before and during World War II, were taken up by artists who espoused Surrealism as the only rational, intellectual sort of humanistic painting that still remained open to them. This phenomenon reflects the specific social context of Japan, where young artists used Surrealism as a vehicle for conveying their sense of injustice at a time when the nation was caught up in the fervor of militarism.

Abstract painting emerged as a new current alongside Surrealism. Although it preceded the latter in Japan, it did not begin to display its pure form until the 1930s. Moreover, individual abstract artists developed in more diverse ways than those working in Surrealism. In the process, some pictures moved toward styles which embodied a mixed form of Fauvism and Cubism. These works attest to the lack of model paintings offering pure renditions of Western styles.

During each period, Western-style painting in Japan was crossbred, transplanted, and further developed. The way in which it was assimilated, however, differed from period to period. During the waning years of the Tokugawa period and at the outset of the Meiji era, assimilation consisted of mastering the techniques of oil painting. During the Meiji era, it took the form of establishing Western painting as a system. In the Taisho era, it involved a recognition of the social nature of painting, seen from the perspective of individual identity. From the beginning of the Showa era to World War II, the assimilation of new Western painting styles reflected an effort to restore rationality in the face of imperialism.

(Curator, Itabashi Art Museum / Japan)

(Translated by Janet Goff)



## Major Trends in the Development of Chinese Modern Art

Li Xian Ting

The art concepts utilised in this discussion are largely derived from the aesthetic and conceptual language of 20th century Western Modernism. This is an acknowledgement of the fact that the language of Modernism has become the international language of art. To a large degree, this reality has dictated the development of modern Chinese art.

Yet there is another vitally important phenomenon that has shaped the development of Chinese art in the 20th century, and which explains the qualities of Chinese modern art which are different from Western art. Since the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when China's doors were "blown" wide open by the West, China has undergone three major cultural and aesthetic transitions marked by a rejection of an established cultural and aesthetic system and the adoption of a new one, always based on a modern Western system. In the course of this process of adoption and adaptation, the Western system underwent various levels of transformation, so that in the end there has been, enacted on Chinese soil, a cultural dialectic between China and the West marked by a pattern of mutual influence and change. It is the phenomenon of these transitions and the cultural dialectic that they have engendered which sets the evolution of China's modern art apart from that of the West.

The first of these transitional periods began in the early part of this century, when the May Fourth movement [launched in 1919] raised the flag of anti-feudalist revolt and advocated the use of modern Western cultural ideas as a means of building a new culture for China. The May Fourth movement also signalled the rejection of traditional literati culture, and paved the way for the eventual adoption of Western-style realism as the main model for Chinese modern art.

The second transition occurred with the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949 and continued through the Cultural Revolution, a period which saw the establishment of new ideological foundations and the development of a new model for art — Maoist Revolutionary Realism — which advocated, on a thematic level, the introduction of utilitarian social concerns, and on a stylistic level, the absorption of elements of Chinese folk art into the imported Western and Soviet Socialist Realist models.

The third transition began in the early 1980s, when, after the isolation of the Cold War and Cultural Revolution periods, China once again unbolted its doors to the West, and information on contemporary Western culture and philosophy came flooding through the newly opened door. The revived contact with contemporary Western philosophical, cultural and aesthetic ideas led to a psychological rejection on the part of artists, particularly of the younger generation, of decades of Revolutionary Realism and its value concepts. The next ten years saw the emergence and

development of Chinese avant-garde art. Just as occurred with the first instance of disillusion with existing cultural value concepts and the resulting attempts to rebuild a new culture in the May Fourth period, the world of modern Chinese art has seen conflict, interweaving, and mutually transformative effects among the Chinese literati tradition, Revolutionary Realism, and modern Western culture — a phenomenon which continues to be an important part of the creative process in China. Because of this, China's new art is not a continuation of the art of traditional Chinese culture, nor is it a rehashing of Western modern art: rather, it is a new integration of myriad influences and myriad cultural and aesthetic factors.

#### **1919–1942: Disillusionment with Traditional Literati Culture and the Introduction of Western Realism.**

Traditional Chinese literati art is characterised by the quest to manifest the "charm of the ink and brush"; to achieve the idealised quality of lightness and fluidity; and to transcend the everyday world. The highest manifestation of this literati aesthetic is found in post-Song literati painting [the Song dynasty ended in 1279 — Ed.], strongly representative of the post-Song intelligentsia's common ideals of "retreating from the world" (*bishi*), and "achieving tranquillity free of earthly cares" (*danpo*). Art is the spiritual manifestation of humanity: yet, with its escapist ideals and its yearning for tranquillity, the literati cast off any concern with the realities of human existence, and became increasingly effete. Its art came to be seen as an act of leisure and diversion, an elegant play, and an object of connoisseurship.

With the demise of the Qing dynasty, the internal and external turmoil affecting China awakened the more progressive of Chinese intellectuals from these other-worldly literati dreams, causing them to turn to alternative means of artistic expression, primarily to Western art trends which offered a strong contrast to the traditional literati aesthetic. Modern thinkers confronted the humiliation and sense of importance affecting the Chinese national spirit, and embarked on a movement against tradition, characterised in part by an "aesthetic revolution" that completely rejected the cultural and aesthetic traditions of literati/feudal society. Among the plethora of modern Western art trends introduced in China in the 20th century, realism held the greatest appeal for reformist artists and intellectuals as being the most closely reflective of their social concerns.

Influential and revolutionary modern thinkers such as Hu Shi (1890–1962) and Li Dazhao (1889–1927) summed up traditional Chinese culture as "passive" (*jing*) in nature. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), and Lu Xun (1881–1936) further pointed out that the demise of Chinese literati painting in the modern world was inevitable, a result of its failure to objectively and faithfully depict observed reality: rather it was constantly engaged in the expression of subjective emotion, an exercise grounded in the desire to escape the world. The end result was that literati art had become increasingly empty and devoid of meaning. In its role of opposition, the Ma



Fourth movement planned to utilise the West's "active" (*dong*) cultural spirit to save and revitalize this "passive" (*jing*) culture, bringing in Western realism and its sense of direct engagement with the world to replace Chinese literati painting's subjective expression of emotion and ideal of transcendence.

From the point of view of aesthetics, literati art's transcendent, or metaphysical, qualities and the exquisite fluidity of its ink-and-brush play, without doubt represent one of the highest pinnacles of art. The metaphysical elements intrinsic to the literati desire for transcendence took literati artists along a path which joined the movement of ink and brush to an expression of the soul — in 20th century terms, a natural development in the evolutionary path of art.

It is important to note that just at the time when, in the early 20th century, Chinese thinkers were hoping to harness Western realism as a replacement for the Chinese literati painter's tradition of subjective expression, traditional European realism was just beginning its transformation into Modernism, a transformation in which the artist sought to escape the restraints of narrative and representation, and turned his attention to the possibilities of color, brushwork and pure form as a direct expression of the emotions.

In fact, beginning with the proponents of the "Art Revolution" led by Chen Duxiu, there were a number of artists in the 1920s and 1930s who recognized this problem. Chen Hengge (1876–1923), Ni Yide (1901–1970), and Huang Binhong (1854–1955) believed that literati painting's lack of emphasis on representational form was actually an artistic advance. These artists held that the main aesthetic question was not whether a painting or sculpture looked like "the real thing" being presented: but rather whether the form presented contained an inner "life" or "vitality." To them, what needed to be changed in traditional Chinese art was not the sublime technique of literati ink painting but rather the fact that literati art had too far distanced itself from real life. They pointed out that important Modernist movements such as impressionism, Cubism, and Expressionism had all begun to move away from a concern with objective form, emphasising instead the free expression of a subjective world. In their minds, this was a positive trend, representing an integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics.

Traditional painters like Huang Binhong imagined the development of Chinese modern art as a process which would change the attitudes of literati art, emancipating it from its "otherworldliness." By bringing it back into the world, they hoped to transform the traditional subjective language of literati art from a classical language into a modern one. But in fact Chinese modern art did not develop in the way these artists had hoped. Instead, what emerged was a raging cultural debate between the artists who sought to reform traditional literati painting by bringing its language up to date on the one hand, and the artists who sought to replace it on the other, represented by the powerful Realist movement led by the painter Xu Beihong (1895–1953), and resulting in the emergence of realism as the major trend and the last world in Chinese modern art for a very long time.

As such, the stance of reformist artists such as Huang brought them into direct confrontation with more revolutionary artists like Xu who advocated the replacement of the "disengaged"



literati aesthetic with Western realism, and for similar reasons abhorred the introduction of Western formalism advocated by Huang and others like him. This argument formed the first great cultural debate, a debate that continued for over twenty years.

Realism was of course not the only style of Western art to have had an impact on Chinese artists in the long period of experimentation, turmoil and change that characterised China in the first half of the century. In the 1920s and 30s there were a number of art students returning to China from study abroad, bringing with them experience of a wide range of Western Modernist art trends, from Impressionism to Surrealism, creating a small-scale modern art movement. Key representative artists of this movement included Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), Pang Xunqin (1906–1985), and Liu Haisu (1896– ), who had all studied in France in the 1920s. Under their influence, art in styles representative of all the major Modernist schools began to appear in China, creating the impression that Chinese modern art was at the very least ideologically in step with the West.

Yet the influence of these supporters of Modernism was largely limited to a stylistic one: in the end, in the raging debate between Realists and Modernists, their position was the weaker one. Influential artists like Li Yishi (1881–1942), who had studied in Japan, and Xu Beihong, who had studied in France, argued against them, warning that it would be socially disastrous if modern art of the ilk of Matisse and Cézanne were to take hold in China: this would represent a dangerous emphasis of form over content.

Given the social conditions of the times, to many Xu's arguments were convincing. The great cultural debate ended with the unquestioned dominance of realism. This marked an important watershed in the development of Chinese modern art: the aesthetic and ideological hegemony of realism meant that autonomy in artistic development had lost out in China. Instead, the dominant social reality "selected" a mode of art that met its ideological needs — needs that certainly would not be met by either literati or Modernist concerns.

In essence, the reason that realism became established as the single most important style in Chinese modern painting is that the Realist movement in China was not so much an aesthetic revolution as a social revolution that aimed at harnessing art to promote revolutionary ideals. The common goal of artists and intellectuals living through the turmoil, pain and humiliation of the years of war and occupation in China was to find a way to save China from the troubles plaguing it: their advocacy of a spirit of "engagement with the world," (*rushi jingshen*), the polar opposite of the literati ideal of "transcendence of the world," (*bishi jingshen*), was the ideological manifestation of their sense of responsibility to put social revolution first, and to act in the name of social utilitarianism. The simplistic formula put forward by the leaders of the Realist movement went something like this: [In art] subjective expression = anti-nature and anti-reality: Realism = a respect for nature and reality = engagement with the world (*rushi jingshen*): Therefore, using a realist stance to fight against subjectivity also = engagement with the world.

Yet on an aesthetic level, this is a false proposition, because essentially the argument is founded on the assumption of the aesthetic validity of the call to rediscover "the spirit of engagement with the world" that was lost by Chinese literati painters after the Song. Once realism was adopted as



an ideology, its development was no longer so much an issue of stylistic method or technique; rather, the development of the Realist movement took place on a lower plane of art, as the quest to be completely reflective of "life itself" inevitably gave rise to an increasing vulgarization. In fact the stated objective of the Realist movement was to arouse the people, and to emphasize the utilitarian social aim of "the popularization of art" — and it found a ready-made shortcut in what might be termed as the making of art "in the vernacular," a tendency which eventually was to become the major characteristic of modern realist art in China.

Thus Western-style realism underwent a major transformation when it was transplanted into the social conditions of China at the time: it was appropriated and modified into an extension of this populist ideology which dictated the future direction of China's own version of realist art.

Another, parallel art movement which reinforced the ideological direction for China's contemporary art was Lu Xun's "Woodcut Movement" of the 1930s. After Modernism and Realism, the Woodcut Movement represented China's third major art movement of the early twentieth century. In essence the Woodcut Movement was similar to an underground resistance movement: it was characterised by a strong fighting spirit, a populist approach and a raging desire to liberate the Chinese people from their wartime enslavement. The Woodcut Movement was strong evidence of modern Chinese intellectuals' concern for the suffering of the people. On an aesthetic level, the movement was responsible for introducing many types of woodcut styles, from German Expressionism to Soviet Socialist Realism, and was particularly influenced by the work of Germany's Carl Meffert and Käthe Kollwitz, and Belgium's Frans Masereel, giving rise to a nascent Expressionist sensibility.

The ideological connection between the Woodcut Movement and the Communist movement is an obvious one. Unlike the failed fledgling Modernist movement, the Woodcut Movement was full of the "spirit of engagement with the world." With the end of the war and the success of the Communist revolution, the Woodcut Movement's sense of rage gradually gave way to hope and enthusiasm for the new society. As a result, a new "pragmatic" realism came into being, reinforced by the merger of the Realist and the Woodcut movements with their similarly political orientation, and their emphasis on the popularisation of art.

The relative cultural immaturity of the times, the stress laid on social utilitarianism, and the undeveloped state of modern critical art theory also influenced the evolutionary path of China's Realist movement. Given these conditions, all three anti-traditionalist movements (Modernism, Realism and the Woodcut Movement) carried within them an inability to absorb and digest the modern Western ideas that they were attempting to introduce. As a result, none of these movements was able to create a new and complete aesthetic language. The new "pragmatic" Realism, born of the similar aesthetic and ideological concerns of the early Realist and Woodcut movements, became the main characteristic of modern Chinese art and established the foundation for Maoist Revolutionary Realism.



## 1942–1979: The Emergence of the First Cultural Integration — The Maoist Model

As stated above, the Maoist model takes as its foundation the Realist movement that developed from the May Fourth period through to the 1940's. In 1942, in his *Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art*, Mao Zedong put forth the two principles that art should serve political ends and that art should entertain and edify the masses, providing a new focus for artists of the time struggling to establish a new and culturally relevant art. In the ensuing years, Mao also issued directives putting into motion a series of large-scale political movements that emphasized the study and incorporation of folk art into the new Realist model.

In 1949, with the establishment of the Communist regime, the ideological process of Sovietization began. The political idealism and folk art movements characteristic of the years in Yan'an became integrated with Soviet Socialist Realism, producing a new style of art — Maoist Revolutionary Realism. From the 1950s through to the 1970s there gradually developed new characteristic of Maoist Revolutionary Realism summed up in the slogans "Sublime, Outstanding, Perfect" and "Red, Bright, and Shining." Maoist Revolutionary Realism became the symbol and the standard of the political idealism of this thirty-year period; at the same time, it became the first and only new Chinese art model of the 20th century since the abandonment and demise of traditional literati art.

The so-called elements of "sublime, outstanding, and perfect" mean that the individuals portrayed in paintings should appear as sublime or heroic, the pictures should convey an outstanding socialist message, and the complete, or perfect, sense of the abilities of the proletariat should be communicated. Essentially, Maoist Revolutionary Realism is the product of Mao's concept that literature and art should politically serve the proletariat. From the point of view of Maoist aesthetics, it represents Mao's efforts from Yan'an through the Cultural Revolution to carry out a "purge" or "purification" (*qingli*) of views on art and of those creating art, because to Mao this was the only way to achieve a realm of pure political idealism and perfection in art. The qualities of "sublime, outstanding, and perfect" are the demonstration of this pure realm.

The qualities of "red, bright, and shining" are Maoist art's ideological characteristics, representing Mao's principle that art and literature should entertain and inspire the masses. Maoist artists studied the bright, colourful elements of folk art so pleasing to the workers and peasants, and found the works that most incorporated these elements were the so-called "New Year's paintings" (*nianhua*). New Year's paintings are decorative, commemorative paintings created for folk festivals and important events in the village calendar. With their bright and festive appearance, what could be better than New Year's paintings to commemorate the success of the Communist Revolution? Thus New Year's paintings became the key stylistic element of the Maoist model.

In the 1950s, under the influence of the New Year's painting movement, a number of artists created oil paintings and even sculptures based on this folk style. Some of the most successful



examples are Dong Xiwen's *First National Day Celebration*, whose bright colours, flat strokes and strongly decorative quality all show the New Year's oil painting style at its most successful. Again, the famous plaster sculpture *At the Landlord's Rent Collection Office*, a collaborative work of artists and peasants, is a particularly successful example of folk-style sculpture.

The close political and cultural ties between China and the Soviet Union during the 1950s naturally resulted in a process of "Sovietization" in art. Many Young academy artists were sent to the Soviet Union to study art and a number of Soviet painters taught art in China during this period. However the strong reemphasis on Chinese folk culture that emerged in the late 1950s and early 60s marked a return to the ideological concerns of the Yan'an tradition.

The Cultural Revolution was Maoist Revolutionary Realism's high point. The fervent political idealism, combined with the increasing coldness of China-Soviet relations, did away with the solemn vestiges of Soviet Socialist Realism. Folk paintings were shown on a large scale in major national museum exhibitions, and their bright colours and romantic, festive emotion created a strong impression on artists, inspiring many, whether consciously or unconsciously, to make lavish use of reds and other bright colours in their palettes, and to paint with quick, energetic strokes that seemed to manifest an almost religious revolutionary zeal.

#### 1979-1992: Major Currents in Modern Art

But, in the long run, Maoist Revolutionary Realism, with its absolutist ideology and pragmatist sensibility, blocked the natural and autonomous development of art, and rejected the possibility of other forms of modern art developing in China. In so doing, it also suppressed the individualism and vitality of Chinese artists. In this way, from its inception, Maoist Revolutionary Realism planted within itself a seed of self-negation: its demise was inevitable. As a cultural background and cultural point of reference it set the stage for the eagerness with which artists welcomed the influx of modern Western art and philosophy after 1979, and in itself holds the key to their desire for choice and social transformation. The loss of the Maoist model's value structures in the post-Cultural Revolution period caused artists of necessity to begin the quest for a new set of values to support their development. They expressed their rejection of the now-discredited Maoist values in a widespread enthusiasm for modern Western culture.

The period after 1979 saw a flurry of experimentation with modern Western philosophical and aesthetic ideas, giving rise to new art trends and movements. The artists of this generation had experienced an absolutist model and wanted nothing more to do with it: instead, they took the Maoist model and its value system as their target of opposition. In this period of broadening mental and aesthetic horizons, artistic development was characterised by a three-fold quest: artists sought a dialogue with modern Western culture, a rediscovery of their native cultural identity, and an awakening of a "humanist" consciousness with its inherent element of cultural reflection and critique. This multifaceted quest became the fundamental characteristic of modern Chinese art in



this period, and engendered four major stages of development.

#### **Stage One: 1979–1983**

##### **The Demand for Stylistic Freedom and the Return to Humanism**

#### **1. The New Formalist Movement**

A new demand for stylistic freedom emerged in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the growing rejection of the Maoist model for art. This demand gave rise to a "New Formalist" movement which began in the late 1970s and marked the awakening stage for modern art in China. Through a new exploration of the beauty of Form for its own sake artists who had experienced the confines of Maoist Revolutionary Realism released themselves from the constrictions and the dictatorial severity of the Maoist model and expressed their interest in non-political, non-social subjects, and their desire to decide for themselves the format for artistic expression. In the spirit of the influx of popular culture from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the New Formalist movement reflected a relaxation in mind-set from the rigid absolutist mentality of the Cultural Revolution. The movement was marked by an interest in and experimentation with early Western Modernist styles such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism.

The two most important groups within the New Formalist movement consisted of the leaders of the art movements of the 1930s and 40s, and the more rebellious of those painters who had studied under the Soviet system in the 50s and 60s. The first group included the painters Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin, Liu Haisu, and Wei Tianlin. After the suppression of Modernist art movements in the 1940s, and in an environment completely cut off from the developments of modern Western art, these artists secretly carried out their formalist experiments, influencing a small but select number of their students such as Chen Junde, Han Boyou and Shen Tianwan, some of whom even went so far as to drop out of the Soviet-style art academies of the times in order to pursue their own directions. Others like Yuan Yunsheng and Xiao Huixiang, art academy students in the 60s, actually underwent political purges for their experimentation with non-Socialist Realist styles.

Again, the importance of the older group of painters in the New Formalist movement lies in the fact that they represented an undercurrent of Western Modernism running parallel to the official art in China, one that managed to survive even after the suppression of the Modernist art movements of the 1930s and '40s. Once China opened up to the West again in the post-Cultural Revolution period, and there was a renewed interest in and access to Western Modernist concepts, this movement naturally came to the fore.

Another important element of the New Formalist movement of the early 1980s was that, just as Western Modernism in its movement against traditional Western representational art turned to Eastern and African folk art for inspiration in the exploration of form, so the younger painters in the New Formalist movement turned their sights to a re-exploration of art in the native Chinese



idiom, including traditional ink painting and folk art. This interest developed into a distinctly "Oriental" decorative style that became the most representative style of early 1980s modern art. The most influential artists working in this decorative style were Yuan Yunsheng and Xiao Huixiang whose mural paintings strongly influenced the art of the period. The "Yunnan School" of Chinese painting, which has found so much favour in the United States, is in fact a derivative of this style. But because this trend was still largely a stylistic one, lacking a deeper aesthetic direction, it was easily overtaken by other new aesthetic and cultural movements developing throughout the '80s.

(One point worth noting is that around 1982 this new decorative style of painting began to show increasingly abstract tendencies, a trend that was frowned upon by the academies, who ideologically rejected abstract art. Also, because the new art of the '80s was increasingly focussed on social and cultural critique, the abstract style did not gain much of a following. However throughout the decade there were artists who showed a strong interest in and experimented with the possibilities of abstract art.)

## 2. Scar Art and Native Soil Painting

The "Scar Art" and "Native Soil" movements reflect an important period of social criticism and humanist reawakening. The core group in these movements consisted of young intellectuals in their late twenties and early thirties who had been "sent down" to the countryside, former Red Guards who had directly experienced both the impact of the Cultural Revolution and of the new open-door reforms of the '80s. (I will call them the "first generation" of post-Cultural Revolution artists). In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, these artists went through a period of grave critical reflection concerning the Cultural Revolution and the Maoist model, and focussed their concern on two major themes: "human nature" and "truth." For youth of this generation, who had grown up in the closed-off world of the "new China," the dictum that art should "truthfully reflect life" (referring to the idealised "truth" of the "New China") was one of the most important concepts that they had absorbed in their limited aesthetic and artistic experience. But after being sent down to the countryside, these young élite, who were educated amid the glamour of Maoist Revolutionary Realism, were for perhaps the first time in their lives confronted with the harsh realities of rural poverty and misery.

Now they were faced with a perplexing duality, made up of the cruel realities of their Cultural Revolution experience on the one hand and the new perspectives of Western art and thought that they were absorbing in the open atmosphere of the early 90s on the other. This duality constituted a tremendous psychological and emotional collision between the differing realities of Western and Chinese culture, the advanced and the backward, the rich and the poor — a collision which impelled them into a period of grave reflection on the psychological and emotional pain they suffered upon realising the great deception that had been perpetrated upon them, and of a wider meditation on society and human nature. They embarked on a serious reassessment of Maoist model



art, and in the process strengthened their rejection of that "reality" which had been so twisted and coloured by political ideology. The recognition of what they now termed as "scarred" reality became their "truth." In direct response to Maoist Revolutionary Realism's principles of "sublime, outstanding, perfect," Scar Art painters adopted in their own version of "realist" painting a contrasting set of principles: "small" (*xiao*) (small topics, "small" people, particularly peasants) "suffering" (*ku*) (depictions of the real suffering involved in a life of hardship and poverty) and "old" or "worn out" (*jiu*) (the face of a backward society). They also focussed on discovering the reality of the land, and of simplicity, taking truth and kindness as their contextual basis for beauty. A sensitivity toward the dark side of society, a concern for the "little people," and praise of the pure and simple in life, constitute the main characteristics of the work of this period. Representative painters include Lo Zhongli, Cheng Conglin and Wang Chuan.

Later, Scar Art painting became increasingly co-opted for political purposes; and as the element of political utilitarianism became stronger and more obvious, the movement was abandoned by many artists. Yet the concern for and interest in the realities of rural life continued, giving rise to the "Native Soil" movement, which had a stronger focus on a rediscovery of the native landscape, and became both an influence on and a symbol of a growing nostalgia for the charms of peasant society in the face of modernization. Native Soil painting established itself as an important style whose influence continues today. Representative painters include Chen Danqing, He Dolin, and Zhou Chunya.

In the course of their development as distinct styles, the Scar Art and Native Soil movements, particularly the latter, transcended the Soviet Socialist Realist model on which Maoist Revolutionary Realism was largely based, and reoriented their artistic model toward classical European art, especially the 17th century Dutch School and the 19th century French representational painters. In the process they also were strongly influenced by the American painter Andrew Wyeth and the French Neo-Classicalists. Yet, despite the positive aesthetic achievements of these movements, they remained to a great extent stylistic trends that never attempted a thorough reassessment of contemporary Realism. In its later development Native Soil painting was weakened by an exaggerated focus on the exoticism of Chinese rural society, tending to emphasise and romanticise its unique qualities to appeal to Western art galleries and collectors and in the process becoming more shallow. In this way the Native Soil movement lost the chance to make any significant or lasting impact on contemporary Chinese culture.

### 3. The *Stars* Exhibitions

In late 1979, the seminal "Stars" art group raised the curtain on China's avant-garde art. An integral part of the activities surrounding the Xidan Democracy Wall movement, the *Stars* exhibitions of 1979 and 1980 created a major cultural impact. Their slogan of "Picasso is our banner, Kollwitz is our model" demonstrated their insistence on stylistic freedom, and the strong resurgence of humanism in art. The artists of the Stars group were largely of the same generation as the Scar



Art artists. The main difference between them was that the Stars artists had not undergone the rigorous training in realist technique at the official painting academies. Perhaps for this reason, in staging their rebellion against official art (i.e., academic realist art), they didn't move in the direction of purely formalist experiments. Instead they became the first truly iconoclastic avant-garde group of the last decade.

From one perspective, the *Stars* exhibitions were milestones in Chinese modern art, for the first time strongly manifesting and further developing two important characteristics that uniquely define Chinese modern art. The first characteristic is their use of a strong social, political and cultural criticism to observe and depict the existential conditions of society. In their exhibitions, most of the works of the Stars artists, and particularly those of Wang Keping, contained strong elements of this socio-political criticism. The second characteristic is that in terms of their aesthetic vocabulary, the Stars adopted a strong element of symbolism while at the same time relying on realist technique in their execution.

In the West, realism has served as the fundamental language of art since the Renaissance. The high level of sophistication of realist vocabulary and technique in a sense inevitably engendered the exploration of form and the resultant plurality of styles that became the main characteristics of Western Modernism.

In China on the other hand, since its introduction at the turn of the century, rather than proceeding along a linear path of development, Western-style realism has undergone constant transformations under the influence of the special characteristics and circumstances of modern Chinese culture. Thus, though it has become the main pictorial language for Chinese modern art, the standard of realist technique has never achieved the same level in China as existed in the West before Modernism. Because of this, many artists still feel challenged to explore further the possibilities of realist art.

Another point is that, since the 1940s, realist technique has been and continues to be the main technique taught at the art academies. This strong tradition of academic realism in modern Chinese art has had a huge and inescapable influence, overshadowing generation after generation of young artists, with the result that even those artists who have tried their utmost to break out of the realist tradition still carry its traces into their work.

The Stars made a valiant attempt to go beyond the conventional concept of realism. Yet their breakthrough lay not so much in terms of technique, but rather in their successful identification of another, more expedient way of casting off the representational realist burden: they did this by imbuing real objects with symbolic meaning. There are strong elements of symbolism in most of the work in the *Stars* exhibitions.

The Stars' failure to find a stylistic alternative to realism can be understood in light of the fact that, even though they were not graduates of the academies, their aesthetic frame of reference in the late 1970s — early 1980s was of necessity limited: in terms of technique, realism was still their earliest teacher. Only Wang Keping managed to go further: taking as his inspiration traditional Chinese "root carving" (*gendiào*), Wang exploited the fact that in this kind of art the emerging



carved form is dictated by the natural shape of the root — or rather by Nature itself. Abiding by this principle in his sculpted wood pieces, Wang produced absurd and fantastical effects which had a strong influence on young artists. Yet most of the Stars, including the abstract painters among them, had not really gone beyond the fundamental aesthetic language of realist art.

Another factor in influencing the role of realism in the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s is that, in the years following the *Stars* exhibitions, the leading exponents of avant-garde art increasingly were graduates of the art academies, with the result that in technical terms the realist element became even stronger. The main difference between the work of these young artists and that of the conventional realist painters was that they introduced into their work a greater focus on symbolic imagery, philosophical content, sense of the absurd and Expressionist elements.

#### **Stage Two: 1984–1986**

##### **Cultural Criticism and the Elements of Heroism and Tragedy**

As has been pointed out, the influx of works of Western philosophy, literature and art pouring into China in the early 1980s were eagerly devoured by young artists, and exerted a strong influence on them. This was particularly true of those artists born in the mid-to-late 1950s who were just entering the art academies in the early '80s, and were in this impressionable period of their lives experiencing new cultural perspectives and new aesthetic languages. In the mid-1980s they graduated and entered society. In their artistic activities they took as their main models Western Surrealism, Dada and Pop; took collective effort as their main method of operation; and used impromptu public (as opposed to "official") exhibitions as their main format of communication and display. Groups of young artists of similar sensibility were emerging in every area of China, eventually becoming part of the largest-scale modern art movement in recent history, which has come to be known as the " '85 New Wave" movement. The '85 New Wave was an intellectual and philosophical, as well as an art movement, involving the "second generation" of post-Cultural Revolution artists, who assiduously applied themselves to the study of modern Western philosophy and literature, who thought hard and wrote much — so much that, in their world, the writing of essays and manifestos on art became a key element of their activities and a major feature of the '85 New Wave movement.

Yet, although the '85 New Wave derived its main source of intellectual and aesthetic nutrition from Western modern art and thought, the movement took as its point of departure the cultural environment of China, with the result that there was a mutual impact between artists' existential environment and their intellectual world. To the largely political focus of the earlier *Stars* exhibitions, the artists of the '85 New Wave added a broader cultural perspective. They gained an understanding of metaphysics from Western philosophy and applied it to their observation of Chinese culture and of the harsh reality of the lives of Chinese people.

Basically, there were three main concerns of the movement: an emphasis on the conceptual

transformation of art; a strong cultural criticism, and reconstructionist ideal; and a consciousness of and concern with the "tragedy of life."

## 1. The conceptual transformation of art

In their attempt to achieve a conceptual transformation of art, the '85 New Wave artists borrowed on a large scale from Western avant-garde art in order to create an anti-art legacy. They were strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp, Dada and Pop art and took to using found objects in their work. They declared war on traditional Chinese aesthetics and adopted the quest of Western modern art to constantly seek new forms of expression, reflected in their slogan "Respond to the challenge of the Western avant-garde!" They sought breakthroughs, à la Duchamp, on the question of the nature of art itself.

One of the most flamboyant artists of the '85 New Wave, Huang Yongping, applied Duchampian methods combined with Daoist and Zen theories of chance and constant change to create an art form that was based on, yet that would differentiate him from, his hero Duchamp. Huang invented what he called "Non-Expressionist Painting," creating his own roulette wheel and dice to determine his painting method, turning his power of decision-making in terms of what or how to paint completely over to chance. On several occasions, he burned all his works at exhibitions, seeking the most thorough way to "abandon art." On another occasion he washed a volume of Western art history and a volume of Chinese art history together in a washing machine, using the machine to represent people's cultural behaviour.

Another conceptually innovative and important artist of the '85 New Wave movement is Gu Wenda, who has consistently used Western avant-garde art concepts as a reference in his attempt to destroy and reconstruct Chinese cultural language symbols. In Gu's process of "reconstruction," he has carried Chinese language symbols into the realm of the mysterious. In some of his major works, Gu turned Chinese ideographs into abstract symbols, putting them through a process of dissection, displacement and reordering, and presenting the result in a combined installation/performance art format that created a powerful atmosphere of ritual and worship, close to that of a Taoist temple. This ritual atmosphere has become the special feature of Gu's unique aesthetic language — a feature which he has consciously used to strike a "competitive balance" with the Western avant-garde.

## 2. Cultural critique and the ideal of reconstruction

For the '85 New Wave artists, "pure reason" and "spiritual transformation and transcendence" were the highest purposes of art. At the same time, they believed firmly in the ideal of revitalising and reconstructing Chinese culture through art, and created a whole vocabulary of new cultural and aesthetic imagery to express this ideal.

The painter Ding Fang employed references to Christianity combined with images of the rugged



Yellow River loess plateaus where Chinese civilisation began, harnessing the heroic style of Western classical art and a reverential, quasi-religious spirit in an attempt to inspire and revitalize the weakened Chinese cultural spirit. Wang Guangyi used the pristine purity of the glacial wilderness as his main imagery: in his *Frozen North Pole* series, perfectly rounded forms hint at holiness and purity, while the awesome aura of a land of frozen silence echoes the potential of mankind to reach transcendental heights. Wu Shanhuan's *Red Humour* series is a strong cultural critique, attempting to expose the truth of post-Cultural Revolution reality. Wu's creative technique is reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg, although he uses Chinese ideographs as his main symbolic unit. Taking phrases from lewd advertisements found in dark little alleyways, and combining them in a format derived from Cultural Revolution big character posters, Wu creates an absurd mockery of the actual reality of "cultural deficit" (a culture "in the red" as it were) of post-Cultural Revolution China.

### 3. Consciousness of the tragedy of life

Chinese culture has always subjugated the individual to the group: the only difference is that traditional Chinese culture subjugated the individual within the larger framework of ethics and morality, while post-1949 socialist culture subjugated the individual to the political group. This tendency has served to destroy the vitality of the quest for greater self-expression. In the early 1980s, although the advent of a "renaissance" in art caused an awakening of people's consciousness, artists' individual vitality was still sapped by life in a strongly collective society and their mentality was still highly politicized.

The '85 New Wave took a different tack, placing an appreciation of the life experience of the individual among the major concerns of art. It is important to note that in this movement many of the artists directly confronted the unavoidable traumas of individual life given the social and cultural conditions of the times, and became greatly concerned in their art with expressing the "illnesses" affecting the individual life force as a consequence. In representing this awareness of the inescapable tragedy of life, artists tended to use two main approaches, which they termed the "cool treatment" (*leng chuli*) and the "warm treatment" (*re chuli*), respectively.

The work of the artist Zhang Peili best exemplifies the characteristics of the "cool treatment." Zhang deals with the commonly seen or experienced "illnesses" of the individual psyche, especially when these illnesses arise as a consequence of abuse — whether self abuse, abuse inflicted on others, or abuse inflicted by others. In Zhang's art, elements of this sado-masochistic condition are enlarged, exaggerated, even made more insidious, transforming his works into a mocking indictment of those who would seek only to find beauty or entertainment in art. Geng Jianyi, another artist working with the "cool treatment," focusses on the embarrassing, humiliating moments faced by people in contemporary Chinese society, and depicts them in an excruciatingly frank and painfully eloquent fashion, often adding an unexpected twist that causes the viewer, almost numb to the fact that he is living in an unhealthy social environment, to be confronted with



an intolerable new level of embarrassment. The works of these two artists, whether in their utilization of the flat, inexpressive strokes and sanitized colours of Western advertisements, or in the unemotional nature of their installations and performance art work, are strongly representative of the emotionally detached tenor of "cool treatment" art.

Contrarily, the work of the artists using the "warm treatment" to communicate the tragic aspects of life demonstrate strong Expressionist elements. Rather than brutal exposure of sado-masochistic illness, they seek to express a sense of sympathetic understanding, even pity, for the trials of life and death and for the individual self faced with these trials. They also differ from the "cool treatment" artists in that, rather than adopting the detached, emotionally uncommitted tone of the latter, they are concerned with expressing the passion of the individual towards life, and his quest to understand it. Representative painter Zhang Xiaogang is like a sleepwalker, pacing on the mysterious path between life and death. His canvasses are invested with the delicate yet rich sentiments of the Eastern sensibility, so that the strange spectres and broken bodies that inhabit his paintings are made eerily beautiful as well as tragic. In Pan Dehai's *Corn* series, the small, numb cellular spaces that lie within the skin of the human figures are at the same time exposed and imbued with a mysterious darkness, as though the artist were undertaking a dissection of the soul itself, revealing an inner view of the hurts of life.

The '85 New Wave movement also was characterised by a strong interest in performance art, usually conceptual in nature, that very often was used to express the sense of the tragic in life. A great deal of New Wave performance art took the form of a kind of "bondage art," in which the artists used a variety of materials—cloth, plastic, tape, etc. — to bind themselves. In fact, this "bondage art" now constitutes a genre of performance art almost unique to the Chinese avant-garde. Perhaps this is the result of the peculiar reality in which Chinese artists must exist — a reality which has given them a strong sense of being bound and repressed, so that for many a form of ritual self-abuse is the most relevant and perhaps the only way to express their sense of tragedy.

The '85 New Wave movement lasted three years, from 1984-1986. As pointed out above, it hungrily absorbed and made use of Western Dada, Surrealism, Pop and Conceptual art — the entire range of the Western avant-garde vocabulary. On the one hand, these artists, graduating from the official art academies with a strong technical training in realist art, were able to make use of that very training in their bid to transcend the strictures of Maoist Revolutionary Realism. On the other hand, they engaged in experiments in Surrealism, Dada and Pop, in essence finding a shortcut to the avant-garde. In sense, Surrealism was best suited to the '85 New Wave artists as a means of conveying the common philosophical and intellectual outlook of their generation. Yet, just because of this, differences in the aesthetic vocabulary of Western Surrealism and the Chinese version become apparent. While Western Surrealism focusses on the expression of the subconscious, Chinese Surrealism as defined by New Wave art emphasizes philosophical expression. Unlike Western Surrealism, the New Wave artists do not dissect and displace realistic images in order to transform them to an extreme degree; rather, they take realistic images and somehow manage to make them alien to us. Also, because of the strong emotional factor coming into play in the work of the New



Wave artists, many of them blended Expressionist elements into the language of Surrealism, reinforcing the unity of the emotionally expressive images and the metaphysical thought behind them. This characteristic is still evident in the work of many artists today.

As for the Dada and Pop aesthetic vocabularies, they were adopted by the '85 New Wave more with the intention of breaking down the traditional forms of art and conventional aesthetic sensibilities. Both data and Pop were used, as the old saying goes, "to smash the jade with a piece of rock from another mountain" (*gongyu jielai de tashan zhishi*) and reflected a fundamental reassessment and critique of Chinese culture. This intention was grounded in a kind of emotional complex which gave artists in the first place a sense of urgency to study and learn from Western modern art and philosophy, and in the second place a strong sense of mission to apply what they had learned in dealing with and hopefully solving the problems of their own land. In other words, artists started out dealing with questions of art and aesthetics, but in the end, no matter what kind of artistic language they experimented with, they eventually tried to apply it as a means of dealing with cultural issues rather than aesthetic ones. In doing so, the '85 New Wave attempted to shoulder a burden far too heavy for them. Thus, if the creation of a new aesthetic vocabulary defines the essential quality of creating a new art form, then the '85 New Wave was not so much an art movement as a cultural movement. That is why, in the end, there were few among the '85 New Wave artists who managed to develop a unique creative language of their own. This failure was to some extent responsible for the rise of a new movement in 1987 antithetical to the concerns of '85 New Wave art.

### **Stage Three: 1987-1989**

#### **The "Back-to-the-Roots" Movement and the Search for a "Purified Language"**

Beginning in 1984 the literary world saw a "Back-to-the-Roots" movement which was influenced by the Native Soil art movement, and characterised by a renewed interest in Eastern philosophy and in a consciousness of the unique cultural characteristics of the motherland. By 1987, the Back-to-the-Roots movement had become a full scale social trend, evident in the visual as well as in the literary arts. Also in 1987, another, parallel movement sprang up, known as the "Purified Language" movement, which sought a purer visual language for art. Both movements were in a sense reactions against the heavy influence of Western Modernism and avant-garde art in the '85 New Wave. Artists of the Back-to-the-Roots movement applied elements of classical Daoist and Zen philosophy, Eastern mysticism, and the "ink-play" of traditional literati painting in response to the '85 New Wave's emphasis on Western art and philosophy, and to the excessively serious tone of its art. The "Purified Language" movement emphasised the pure and autonomous nature of art to counter the '85 New Wave's heavy philosophical and intellectual bent.

Two new art forms emerged from these movements. The first, as exemplified in the paintings of Zhu Xinjian, involved the absorption of traditional Chinese literati inkplay into what became



known as "New Literati" painting, emphasising spontaneity, and a buoyant, carefree (one could say "irresponsible") spirit, and made a strong impact at the time. The rediscovery of the aesthetic language of traditional literati painting in a way satisfied the psychological loss experienced by some artists as a result of the onslaught of Western Modernist and avant-garde art. This psychological imbalance was redressed by returning to classical Chinese painting's spirit of idle play, seen as a means of countering the '85 New Wave's heavy cultural reflection and criticism.

But the development of New Literati painting was inhibited by the fact that it relied too heavily on a mere borrowing of the uniqueness and eccentricities of classical painters as a means of fulfilling a psychological craving: in the end the artists failed to address their own current reality. The result was that the effectiveness of New Literati painting as an art form was undermined by its tendency merely to amuse and please the eye with its beauty. It quickly became a commercial more than an aesthetic success, and in the end its influence on the development of China's new art turned out to be a short-lived one.

The second, and more important trend, sought to discover and transform the fundamental symbols of traditional art and culture. For example, some artists studied the painterly qualities and expressiveness of calligraphic strokes to restructure a new vocabulary for abstract ink painting. Other influential artists such as Xu Bing and Lü Shengzhong undertook a rearticulation and semantic transformation of fundamental cultural signs such as Chinese ideographs and paper cuts used in ritual ceremonies. Both Lü and Xu were strongly influenced by the '85 New Wave. In Xu Bing's important installation *A Mirror to Analyse the World* (also known as *A Book from the Sky*) Xu borrowed the technique of '85 New Wave artists such as Gu Wenda, of altering and "miswriting" Chinese characters. The difference is that while the New Wave artists were working from a Dadaist perspective Xu was using the miswriting of Chinese characters as a means of cutting words off from their meanings, turning them into purely abstract symbols in a quasi-structuralist fashion.

Xu spent months meticulously carving woodblock ideographs that superficially looked like Chinese characters, but which on closer inspection proved to be nonsensical. Using the radicals of Chinese characters as his basic unit of form, Xu made monumental sized scrolls and executed on their surface a number of prints and overprints to create new character structures. He then hung the scrolls according to the conditions of the specific exhibition venue, constructing a carefully determined space. Through the ceaseless and meticulous repetition involved in executing this major piece of work, Xu succeeding in creating a kind of neo-Zen atmosphere.

Lü Shengzhong, on the other hand, was responding to another important trend of 80s art that also developed under the influence of Western Modernism, involving its interest in the possibilities of ethnic art in a quest to rediscover the richness of Chinese folk art. In the mid-1980s this enthusiasm for folk art turned from the study of folk art as formalist "signs" to a study of the cultural significance of these signs. Lü Shengzhong was active in this transition. In works incorporating specific folk imagery such as the "tussle-haired baby" (*zhuaji wawa*) motif, Lü was participating in an effort to reinterpret the mystical significance of Chinese concepts of birth, and of the soul. In his major series of installations, *Summoning the Spirits*, the artist employs a



structuralist principle as his starting point. Using a repetitive structure of paper doll cutouts in linked and collaged formats, Lü transforms the traditional magical use of these paper cutouts as a means of calling the spirits, into a modern language structure whose final aim is to create a new, contemporary environment for Eastern mysticism.

Using a modern Western aesthetic language as a means of uncovering new meanings in traditional cultural symbols, Xu and Lü's work constitute a first step in constructing a new, integrated modern Chinese aesthetic language. But their work remained at the first-stage level: consciously or unconsciously, both these artists became increasingly absorbed in their personal aesthetic language, with the result that their later work showed a danger of becoming excessively formulaic and predictable — a problem that at one level afflicted the whole Purified Language movement.

#### **Stage Four: 1989–1992**

##### **Anti-Idealism, Cynical Realism and Political Pop**

###### **1. The anti-idealist reaction**

Like 1979, 1989 was the most sensitive year of the decade for Chinese artists and intellectuals. In early February, the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition was held in Beijing at the prestigious China Art Gallery. Nearly all the major artists of the decade participated. In some cases the art shown still manifested the tragic-heroic spirit of artists who hoped to reconstruct a new culture, while in others it demonstrated achievements of artists in integrating lessons of Western Modernist and avant-garde art and reaching the first stage in the development of an art form uniquely reflective of China's culture. In any case, no matter to which group the artists belonged, all showed a certain idealism and courage in entering for the first time an "official" gallery which was the most prestigious in China. Then, on opening day and completely unexpectedly, the sound of gunshots echoed through the gallery: the artists Tang Song and Xiao Lu had fired shots at their own installation, shocking the officials attending the show, and startling the artists and the audience. The result was that, amidst chaos and confusion, the exhibition was temporarily shut down. When the high rank of the owner of the gun used to fire the shots was discovered, the well-connected Tang and Xiao (both children of high-level officials) were released — and this only three days after having been arrested. Under the watchful eyes of plainclothes police, the exhibition was allowed to reopen.

But in the scenario of the arrest of two individuals on what in most circumstances would have been considered serious charges, followed by their subsequent speedy release, Chinese artists had effectively exposed one of the most sensitive political issues in Chinese society: the flexibility of the law. Because of this, those two gunshots transformed the entire *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition into one big, chance happening that underscored the opposition to the official line and the political



sensitivity of the Chinese avant-garde since the *Starts* exhibitions of 1979–80. Thus, the gunshots fired by Tang and Xiao into their installation were also the mechanism by which the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, and the '80s avant-garde art movements that it represented, were led to the execution block. Effectively, the artists involved were thrown out of the national art museum and forced once again into the world of the underground. In a way the fate of the exhibition was a precursor to the fate of the student movement at Tian'anmen, in the sense that the *China/Avant-Garde* show became the final demonstration of '80s avant-garde art, marking the conclusion of an era and also the end of its ideals.

For those idealistic New Wave artists who still believed in the possibility of applying modern Western aesthetics and philosophy as a means of revitalizing Chinese culture, the events of 1989 in many ways recall the aftermath of the Xidan Democracy Wall movement of a decade earlier: once again young, idealistic artists were faced with a situation that crushed their idealism and broke their spirits. The reaction of many was to turn against the heroism, idealism, and yearning for metaphysical transcendence that characterised the '85 New Wave movement, and turn instead to their antithesis: a form of anti-idealism characterized by an immersion in popular culture and a deconstructionist approach that for many quickly resolved itself into the Cynical Realist and Political Pop styles.

## 2. Cynical Realism and the sense of malaise

"Cynical Realism," [the Chinese term *bopi*, rendered here as "cynical," can also be translated as "rogue" — Ed.] the term I have chosen to describe one style of anti-idealist art, employs an expression that the Chinese use to describe a certain way of dealing with the world, which generally also carries the connotations of dissipated, jaded, scoundrelly, resigned, indifferent and mocking. The main exponents of the Cynical Realist style are young artists who were born in the 1960s, and who in the '80s were largely still studying at the academies. They constitute the "third generation" of post-Cultural Revolution artists, and the social and cultural environment in which they came of age was vastly different from that of the previous two. The first generation grew up in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cultural Revolution, while the second, the '85 New Wave artists, came of age under the compelling influence of modern Western thought. But both groups, whether in their search for a new humanism on the one hand or in their attempt to revitalize the cultural spirit through an absorption of modern Western ideas on the other, can be categorised as idealists who firmly believed in the possibility and the mission of saving Chinese culture. But the case was very different for the young artists born in the 1960s.

In the 1970s, many of these artists were just starting primary school, beginning their education in a social environment where concepts and ideologies were constantly changing. In the 1980s, they were studying art amidst the avant-garde challenge of applying contemporary Western ideas to save and revitalize Chinese culture. By 1989, when most of them were just emerging from the academies, they had visited for themselves the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition and seen first-



hand the dreams of "saving Chinese culture" evaporate into thin air. Whether in terms of social or artistic ideals, the only legacy left to them from the hopes and struggles of the last ten years consisted of nothing but broken fragments.

With little left to hold on to, these young artists rejected what they viewed as the empty dream of structuring a new value system to save society, and gave up any pretense to heroism or idealism. Instead, they confronted the reality of their own helplessness in order to save themselves. A sense of malaise became for them the "truest" reflection of their feeling of the meaninglessness of their own lives and the social conditions in which they existed: since it was all meaningless anyway, there was no call for an attitude of reverence toward life. In the place of reverence and seriousness they adopted a kind of rogue cynicism in their treatment of the reality that confronted them.

The attitude of malaise adopted by the Cynical Realist artists was their means of expressing their rejection of the idealism and heroism of the 80s movements, and particularly of the '85 New Wave. The Cynical Realists traded in the lofty, idealist platform of the New Wave artists for a ground-level perspective which placed them and their artistic activities directly back in the middle of mundane reality. They used a roguishly cynical approach to illustrate themselves and their immediate and familiar environment, with its tableaux of boredom, chance, and absurdity. Representative artist Fang Lijun began to paint portraits of himself and his friends in the midst of executing giant yawns. Fang also created his own unique lexicon of symbols, based on what might be termed a "bald cynicism." Another important Cynical Realist painter, Liu Wei, created an irreverently cynical pictorial language centered on a series of distorted family portraits, using his own bizarre vocabulary to render ridiculous the solemn, self-important postures of army cadres and even the poses of his own family members. This "distorting perspective" of Cynical Realist art has become the signal expression of the sense of malaise widespread in post-1989 Chinese society.

At the same time, the frank directness of Cynical Realist painters naturally makes their painterly technique tend toward the realist style. Especially as these artists are not at all convinced that constant study of and experimentation with Western Modernist styles will in any degree save Chinese culture, they adopt the attitude of "why forsake the near to chase after the far?" These renegade graduates of the official art academies have at their fingertips a great facility in realist technique that is part and parcel of modern Chinese art academy training, and they are more than happy to make practical use of their talents. At the same time, they are perfectly willing to learn whatever they can from Western artists, and are especially partial to the works of Lucian Freud and Balthus.

### 3. Political Pop art

Political Pop is a genre that developed and spread throughout the socialist world from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s. Combining the commercial dimension of Western pop with the political icons of socialism resulted in works rich in a particular style of humour and absurdity. Political Pop can also be seen as emblematic of the late Cold War period, a manifestation of the



egregious absurdity artists felt as Western commercial culture infiltrated the Socialist Bloc.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Czech artist Milan Kune and the Soviet artists Alexander Kosolapor and Leonid Bohov began creating Political Pop at roughly the same time. In their works they utilised Western consumer icons like Coca-Cola as part of a humorous re-presentation of Communist symbols such as Lenin, Stalin and the hammer and sickle.

It was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, that Political Pop made its first appearance in China. Unlike the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Political Pop in China was not part of a movement aimed at desecrating political leaders, rather it evolved at a time when a popular revival of the Mao Zedong cult (the *Maore* or 'Mao craze' as it is called in Chinese) was sweeping the nation.

In 1991–92, numerous Cultural Revolution-period songs glorifying Mao were recorded and released, large numbers of books related to Mao were published, Mao badges made a reappearance and Mao portraits were printed on t-shirts and a range of other products. There was, I would argue, a more complex popular mentality at work in the history of Political Pop in China than we have seen in either the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. The Mao craze of the early 1990s reflected a 'Mao obsession' that still haunted the popular psyche. It is an obsession that combined both a nostalgia for the simpler, less corrupt and more self-assured period of Mao's rule with a desire to appropriate Mao Zedong, the paramount god of the past, in ventures satirising life and politics in contemporary China. This satirical spirit was also reflected in the student demonstrations of 1989, particularly notable when demonstrators surrounded the police and the army and sang revolutionary songs at them. Both instances — that is of the students' demonstrations in 1989 and the popular appropriation of Mao thereafter — were an expression of a typical style of Chinese irony, a temper and style of expression that has evolved among people who have lived for so many years under extreme political pressure. It is a form of irony that takes as its basic strategy an inversion of Maoist language and symbolism.

Some believe that the use of political images from the Cultural Revolution in contemporary Chinese art is representative of a type of mass cultural memory rather than being simply part of a critique of politics today. The important thing about artistic use of the image of Mao Zedong in Mainland China, I would argue, is not its political significance, but the way in which the image is manipulated. After all, an image is altered by the very fact that it is incorporated into an artistic work. As Duchamp observed in 1917: when an image, an everyday object, is selected and given both a new name and significance, in is deprived of its original function and reveals a new meaning.

Whether it be Political Pop in art or the popular reprisals of Mao during the 'Mao craze' of the early 1990s, the significant thing is that Mao has now become a pop icon in China. This represents a massive shift away from the days when Mao was a solemn and awe-inspiring god. Mao's aura of sanctity has been dissolved by these acts of commercialisation and popularisation.

For the artist, Political Pop is a creative endeavour, whereas the 'Mao craze' has been part of a larger trend towards commercialisation in China and has lacked the self-conscious dimensions of the artists work. This is what I mean when I talk of the consumption of socialist ideology in China



and in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe prior to the end of the Cold War. It is in this sense that the 'Mao craze' has been a fitting end to the post-Mao period of the 1980s. Mao made a reappearance at a time when the system of beliefs represented by him were being swept away by a tide of commercialism.

The early 1990s marks the second period in which Pop has made an appearance in contemporary Chinese art. Following the 1985 exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg's work in Beijing, a fad for Pop swept the Chinese art scene. Artists were particularly interested in Rauschenberg's use of salvaged/found objects. This allowed them to escape for the first time from the easel and make an all-out assault on the accepted Chinese aesthetic.

The introduction of Pop in Mainland China led interestingly to a Dada-type artistic movement. Although Pop art was a continuation of Dadaism it was also the product of a highly commercialised environment; the attitudes of the artistic engaging in Pop art were necessarily vastly different from those of the post-World War I Dadaists. In mid-1980s China, younger artists thought of themselves as revolutionaries united by a desire to overthrow the aesthetic and linguistic conventions of Chinese art. They were interested in how manufactured or found objects could have an impact on two-dimensional art. Dada had used objects to rebel against accepted aesthetic standards in the past; it is therefore not surprising that Chinese artists accepted the Dadaist aspects of Pop art while generally ignoring its possibilities as a form of mass or popular art.

Five years later in 1989, the modern art movement in China was repressed by the authorities while economic reforms continued apace, along with the wholesale commercialisation of Chinese society. The popular, vulgar and indeterminate aspects of commercialisation had a particular influence on Chinese artists who naturally began to utilise the language of Pop. In the context of the history of recent Chinese art, the 'mis-reading' of Pop art in 1985 as a form of Dada had a revolutionary significance in China that fuelled the trend towards Political Pop in the early 1990s.

In terms of modern art, China's Political Pop has been deeply influenced by American Pop, in particular the work of Andy Warhol. The differences between the two are, however, that American Pop strengthens, even sanctifies, popular icons, while Political Pop converts sacred political icons into pop images. Where American Pop utilised popular commercial and other icons, Political Pop draws more on the collective cultural memory, in particular those images which are most representative of the revolutionary age such as Lenin, Mao, the symbols of the Communist Party, the red star and so on, mixing these images with contemporary Pop icons.

This is evident, for example, in Alexander Kosolapov's *Lenin Coca-Cola*, or Wang Guangyi's 'Great Denunciation Series' (*Dapipan*) which combines the Cultural Revolution icons of the Worker, Peasant and Soldier with commercial symbols such as Coca-Cola. Similarly, Zhang Peili's *The Beauty Competition (Jianmei)* combines the fireworks of the revolutionary past with the image of body-building competitions. The Shanghai artist Yu Youhan has juxtaposed Mao with Whitney Houston, while Qi Zhilong has secreted Mao's image in a colour photograph of contemporary stars.



A more humorous interpretation of the Mao era is Feng Mengbo's *Game Over* (*Youxi jiesu*), where the artist has inserted characters from the Revolutionary Model Operas into a video game scenario, while Geng Jianyi's *Forever Effulgent* (*Yongfang Guangmang*) replaces the image of Mao familiar from Cultural Revolution propaganda iconography with the Panda and images taken from Chinese money (*renminbi*).

Other artists who have engaged in Political Pop make similar substitutions, juxtapositions or mixtures. This genre, as in other (now former) socialist countries, is the product of a socialist cultural environment. The erratic nature of social development has meant that a range of cultures and mentalities coexist in the same space and time: the Cultural Revolution, post-Cultural Revolution, peasant society culture and even post-industrial culture commingle in the China of today. Added to this is the general decay of values and all of these elements combine to create a confusion of cultural memories and their interrelationship. Tumbled together in the tidal wave of commodification, political fixations are deconstructed in the general mood of 'instant consumption'.

Finally, where American Pop converted vulgar icons into something more elevated on highbrow, revealing an underlying seriousness in this style of art, in China, the sacrosanct has been vulgarised, epitomising an attitude that is playful and humorous.

A clear sense of criticism is the most fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde art produced in China in the last decade. Yet each stage of its development was characterised by a different critical sensibility: the early 1980s can be characterised as the stage of social criticism, the mid-80s as the stage of cultural criticism, and the 90s as the stage of art criticism. In the first two stages, only a handful of artists achieved a clear individual language of expression: the overall tendency still was to apply the language of Western Modernism or avant-garde art as a tool to recognize and reflect the problems of Chinese society and culture. The post-'89 stage of "art criticism" has produced art that represents a first step in being able to forcefully and innovatively wield the language of Western Modernist and avant-garde art to penetrate social and cultural realities. In this sense China's new art is now poised in the wings of the international art arena, and has launched its prologue in the establishment of a new dialogue with Western culture. Above all, it is our hope that, as Chinese modern art comes into its own, it will develop a unique aesthetic language that will signify and communicate the reality of our times.

(art critic/China)

(Translated by Valerie C. Doran)

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## Proposals from the Present

Shimizu Toshio

The purpose of this session is to explore the present condition of Asia in terms of its art. This involves a number of difficulties. The first difficulty is defining what is meant by Asia. Who first used the word Asia? What does it mean as a cultural concept? Where are its geographical boundaries?

The second difficulty is defining the word art. There is no commonly accepted definition behind our awareness of art. The concept of art took form in the West: using the word art in Asia without thinking its meaning could bring confusion.

The third problem is that it is physically impossible to invite panelists from every region of Asia, so voices from all the regions of Asia cannot be heard in this session. In any case, the current situation of Asian art is highly diverse and it would be impossible to discuss all aspects of it in detail.

These difficulties are preconditions which must be accepted as we proceed with the discussion in this session. Five panelists have been invited to participate: Apinan Poshyananda, Kuroda Raiji, Miyajima Tatsuo, Cai Guo Qiang, and Zulkifli B. Yusoff. What these five panelists and the chairman have in common is experience of cultures different from their own. Some have been educated in the West and some have worked in the West or in other Asian countries. Our aim is to have panelists who have looked at their own culture in an alien culture and to look at Asia in a global context.

Now that the cold war is over, the world is being restructured. The end of the cold war structure is also the end of the supremacy of Western modernism. In the past, the countries of Asia were forced to become Western colonies and then were invaded by Japan, a country which had been modernized on the model of the West. Before these countries were completely transformed into modern nations on the Western pattern, however, the world changed. Even Japan, the country which is seen as having achieved modernization more quickly than any other in the region, is not actually a modern country in the Western sense.

The ideal of Western modernism no longer operates. For good or ill, the Western model which Asians were forced to accept is losing its effectiveness. The West has not yet disappeared, but it no longer possesses its former authority. This inevitably results in a vacuum. Will this vacuum be filled with the word "Asian"? Or does such a thing exist? This is the time to examine the validity of "Asian."

The differences between various cultures are becoming more pronounced. Different cultures are coming into conflict and being forced to co-exist. The concept Asia no longer connotes a vague



aggregate. The differences and similarities it contains are being appreciated for themselves. In order to examine the meaning of Asia and the possibility of a concept of Asia requires the kind of viewpoint based on experience of different cultures possessed by the five panelists.

Apinan Poshyananda is well-versed in the circumstances of contemporary artists in the Southeast Asia region, especially in Thailand. Geographically, Thailand lies at the center of Southeast Asia where different cultures come into contact. Poshyananda looks at the post-cold-war battle for hegemony over Asia from a unique viewpoint.

Kuroda Raiji tries to learn the meaning of Asia from Asian artists who live in the West. These artists who have been placed in an alien culture question their own existence on a daily basis, but they do so in different ways. The meaning of Asia is scattered through a variety of different responses.

Miyajima Tatsuo is an artist with a great deal of experience exhibiting outside Japan. He himself says that being Asian does not come before being a human being. While Kuroda suggests the existence of art peculiar to Asia, Miyajima sees a universal art as most important. For him, Asian elements do not transcend technique.

Cai Guo Qiang also shares the attitude of using Asian things as a springboard to the universal. He has shown actively all over the world but especially in Japan. He feels that Western civilization is transforming itself and that oriental civilization has a great deal to contribute to it.

Zulkifli B. Yusoff was educated in England and exposed to Western modernization. However, he distinguishes sharply between things which should be learned from the West and things which should not.

These individuals, with their experience of alien cultures, are well-suited to generate new concepts from the current state of diversity in the world. I hope that we can discuss concepts which transcend Asia.

This discussion will take place in terms of contemporary art, but we should not forget to consider the basic question of what art is. The concept of art originated in the West, and the internationalist idea of modern art also comes from the West. These words contain the history which will be discussed in Session II but have achieved meanings and content which are current in Asia, and the meaning and content of art vary with the region and the individual. In some cases, traditional creative activities which were not previously classified as art are now included in the category. There are also still people who believe in a pure internationalism. It is difficult to speak of events which occur outside of the Western world in the words of the Western world, but if we enter our discussion fully aware of this state of affairs, an image of art for a new age should emerge. Art for a new age will be born from the chaos of today's world.

(artistic director, Contemporary Art Center, Art Tower Mito/Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)



## Suggestions for the Symposium

Nakamura Hideki

I am writing these brief comments as the chairman of two symposium sessions, Session I, "The Contemporary Art Scene in Asia," and Session IV, "The Potential of Asian Spirit." In this position, I must look at the papers contributed by the panelists ahead of time and make comments which will help the discussion proceed smoothly and profitably. The other two chairmen will have an opportunity to speak as panelists in Session IV, but I will not have an opportunity to make direct comments, so I would like to take this opportunity to give some of my personal views in order to make it easier for others to understand the reasons and intentions behind questions I will ask while chairing these sessions.

In my opinion, the acceptance of Western modernism in Asia, a central issue to be raised in Session II, "History: Steps Toward the Present," has seldom gone beyond the superficial level of style. Naturally, form and style are essential to the history of art and one should not leap to conclusions without due attention to the historical process within each country, so I hope for a careful examination of this matter. I believe, however, that the dualistic framework of "great local tradition" and "advanced Western art" put forth by Ushiroshoji Masahiro, who will present a paper in Session I, can only be found on the level of a conflict between styles in modern Asian art. If it were accompanied to a significant extent by a deeper, subjective structure which is an original source for style it would have been possible to achieve a style which synthesized the spiritual structure of local tradition and the subjective structure of Western modernism. Looking to the future rather than criticizing the past, I would like to solicit the opinions of the panelists from each country in Session II on this issue.

Alice Guillermo gives a detailed discussion of the history of modern and contemporary art in the Philippines. What are the prospects for the future which emerge from this history? Jim Supangkat brings us a wealth of knowledge on the actual circumstances of the modernization of Indonesian art. How does he analyze the uniquely Indonesian qualities of artists with extensive experience in Europe and the modernity of artists rooted in their own ethnicity?

What I have referred to here as spiritual or subjective structures are people's ways of thinking or dealing with the world, what Miyajima Tatsuo, a panelists in Session III, identifies specifically as "the holistic approach of the Orient" and "the evolutionary, deterministic, and reductionist thinking of the West." A focus on this area which precedes style should prove helpful in thinking about the following issues.



### What is "Asian Spirit(=Thought)"?

Session IV is entitled "The Potential of Asian Spirit." It might be useful for the purposes of the discussion to explain how this phrase was chosen. According to the ASEAN Culture Center the Japanese phrase *Ajia shicho* was first given to the panelists in English as "Asian spirit." At the stage of determining the main title of the symposium it was changed to "Asian thought." There was no change in the original Japanese. This phrase was tentatively and nebulously defined as a non-Western way of thinking and dealing with the world, a way of human life, corresponding to Miyajima's "holistic approach of the Orient." There was also a certain awareness of a connection with concepts like "temporality," "open systems," and "complexity" which are recently receiving attention in the natural sciences. Thought was given to exploring possibilities beyond the stalemate of thinking within a "self-contained framework with a single center." A complementary or reciprocal relationship was expected to be found between what Miyajima calls "the West" and "Asia," not simply a rejection of Western ways of thinking.

However, this idea of "Asian Spirit(=thought)" is only a tentative guideline for discussion. It does not refer to some existential reality which must eventually be recognized. Indeed, it need not be used as a category within a "self-contained framework with a single center." The possibilities of ways of thinking differ with the ethnic, religious, cultural, and political circumstances of each Asian country. Part of the significance of this symposium lies in bringing out these differences. It is not important to find common ground beyond these differences through discussion. Ultimately, confirming differences is also an achievement of a sort. What is important is to gain knowledge of the facts.

While "The Potential of Asian Spirit" is the theme of Session IV, I would like to ask for comments from the panelists of different countries on this subject in Session III as well. I would like to hear the opinion of Cai Guo Qiang, with his experience of China and Japan, on what is specifically "Asian" which does not exist in Europe. How does Zulkifli B. Yusoff, a resident of Malaysia with roots in Islam and the Asian region, see Asia after his experience in England and Brisbane? I would like to ask Shimizu Toshio, the chairman of Session III, to solicit their comments so that they might be summarized in Session IV.

### Political and Social Content in Art

Today art works with strong political or social content are a vital and powerful presence in many Asian countries. As Ushiroshoji Masahiro states, this may be a manifestation of "seeking the source of originality in social reality rather than in tradition," but it definitely goes beyond art which stays within the superficial realm of style. There were active anti-establishment art movements in Japan in the fifties and sixties and through the early seventies. After that they lost their force. Today very little Japanese art is produced with a strong social or political message. This fact does



not mean that Japan is more advanced, rather that artists are oppressed by a bitter reality. Sincere Japanese observers see things in the art of Southeast Asia or China which have been lost in their own country and are drawn to it. I hope that this fact will be accurately stated to the panelists of other countries by the Japanese participants.

There is another related problem which is important and needs to be solved. Are works of art essentially media or devices for effectively communicating social and political messages or are they defined by specifically artistic qualities which are strengthened by social and political messages? If the latter, how are these artistic qualities best brought out? In particular, I wonder how this problem has been dealt with in the Chinese art scene since 1980. How is it handled today? I would like to hear the comments of panelist Li Xian Ting in Session II and would like to ask the chairman, Tani Arata, to direct attention to this issue.<sup>1</sup>

Let me state the question in a different way. Let us say that the central concern of a particular art work is a message of protest against some political or social situation. The protest message is correct and necessary. It is appropriate for the maker of the art work to participate in the protest action as a concerned citizen. Then the political or social problem at issue is solved. The situation is changed and the object of the protest is weakened or no longer exists. In a different case, the protest may lose its validity or be repressed to the extent that protest becomes impossible. In these cases, how can the specific reason for being of the work of art, its creative identity, be maintained? (It does not matter whether the work exists physically or not.)

Human beings live in particular circumstances and must respond to them. How is a universal expression produced from particular circumstances and made accessible to people? The fact that a piece of work treats a social and/or political problem does not necessarily make the work a great one. I would hope for an exchange of opinion on this subject by the panelists in Session III. In particular, I would like to ask Apinan Poshyananda to comment on this subject with respect to what he calls "Japanese flavor." And I would like to hear a response by Mr. Miyajima.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Mutual Cooperation Between Curators**

In Session IV, I would like to obtain specific suggestions on the unique possibilities for diverse expression in Asian art and identify relevant problems. At the same time, I hope to have a frank exchange of opinion on the practical problems involved in the presentation of international exhibitions of contemporary Asian art in the future. The latent possibilities of Asian art can be brought out more effectively through certain ways of organizing exhibits. On this topic, the ideas of Apinan Poshyananda on "international group relations" should prove suggestive.

Personally, I have nothing to object to in his views. In a recent article when I wrote for a Japanese magazine on "Policy for Organizing Exhibitions of Asian Art," I asked four questions. Why hold exhibitions of contemporary Asian art? What does "Asia" mean? Is Japan a part of Asia? How should Asian artists be selected? In many areas my opinions were in agreement with

Poshyananda, so I would like to hear his ideas in further detail in the symposium.

Unfortunately, Poshyananda has quoted selectively from my writings in his paper *Asian Art in the Posthegemonic World*, noting an emphasis on the discoveries and contributions of the Japanese in a way that distorts the overall purpose of the original. He juxtaposes a phrase at the beginning where I speak of "exploring and analyzing the contemporary art of Southeast Asia in this paper as a step in restructuring the thinking of humankind" with a fragmentary quotation, "In the future, Southeast Asians will probably become conscious of themselves as Asians," made in the context of another statement, "Southeast Asians, Westerners, and Japanese must pursue ways of being human in a global sense starting from their different positions." He concludes that my statements reveal a Japanese sense of superiority, a view which I must reject. I believe it is clear from the content of the paper that the title *The Self-Awareness of Human Beings in Flux* refers to enlightenment to be obtained by learning from Southeast Asian contemporary art.

All the same, we should listen to his arguments on the dangers of Japanese cultural hegemonism. I believe that a frank exchange on this issue will be meaningful for international mutual understanding in the future. I hope for comments on it in Sessions III and IV. In Session IV in particular, I would like to pay attention to the opinions given by the Japanese panelists as well as Apinan Poshyananda. Tani Arata has been actively involved in organizing Asia-related international art exhibits and has written and published a book on contemporary Asian art. Shimizu Toshio and Shioda Junichi have a great deal of practical experience as museum curators and are both planning exhibitions of Asian art for the near future. I am certain that their comments will have a great effect on the success of the symposium. Poshyananda has stated that we need to drop the polite Asian approach of avoiding confrontations in order to prevent misunderstanding, and I agree with him completely on this.

(art critic/Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)

#### Notes

1. I believe that social and political content and artistic qualities can be coordinated through the kind of meta-viewpoint described in my article, *Shiten Shisutem no Henkan* (viewpoint system transformation), *Gendaishiso "revue de la pensée d'aujourd'hui,"* April and May, 1994.
2. Hokusai is described as a non-establishment figure who maintained his identity in all situations rather than a person who sought his identity in protest against the establishment in my book, *Hokusai Mangekyo* (English title: *Gazing at Hokusai's Constellation — Toward Polyphonic Vision*). Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1990.



## Southeast Asian Art in the Nineties

Ushiroshoji Masahiro

1. A new, shared attitude began to appear in much of the art of Southeast Asia at the end of the 1980s. The works of art which began to attract attention had social and political content. They depicted everyday reality in order to examine changes in society. In addition to the use of social concerns as content and subject matter, artists made installations and did performances, uncommon art forms for Southeast Asia, and made frequent use in their art of ordinary, everyday objects.

I would like to consider the meaning of this use of realism, as it appeared in the Southeast Asian art of the nineties, in the context of Asian art in general.

2. The early modern art of Southeast Asia developed in a process of adopting the "advanced art of the West" while trying to maintain a uniquely Southeast Asian quality. For this purpose, the artists of Southeast Asia generally looked to the cultural tradition which had flourished in the past as basis for self-expression. The basic approach of Southeast Asian artists was to search for their identity on a narrow path passing between the West and their own tradition. The tendencies of nationalism and orientalism were dangerous and seductive traps set along this road.
3. The current realist tendency breaks away from the dualism of the West and tradition, the old approach of achieving original artistic expression by fusing "the great native tradition" and "the advanced art of the West." Artists are now seeking their identity in the social realities of today rather than in tradition, thus transcending the restrictive framework of earlier modern art in Asia.

This concern with reality has turned to the everyday and the familiar, resulting in the use of common, everyday objects as art materials (influenced to a large extent, of course, by Western trends). There is also a demand for new subject matter and content and new art forms. New modes of expression such as performance and installation are coming into use. As a result, artists are no longer bound by luxurious (imported) art materials and techniques like oil painting on canvas. There is greater familiarity and intimacy, thus greater earnestness, in both subjects and materials.

4. The new art may be tentatively described as a "more spontaneous artistic expression." A specific example of this spontaneity is the work of Roberto G. Villanueva, who lives in the regional city

of Baguio and explores his identity by dealing with issues like center and periphery, the West and Asia, modernity and anti-modernity. Other examples are Tang Da Wu, who addresses global issues such as destruction of the environment from a Chinese perspective, Montien Boonma, who searches for a profound spiritual world behind the changing reality of the city, Roberto Feleo, who attempts to regain his own history by visually retelling the history given by the rulers from the viewpoint of the people, and Tan Chin Kuan who examines his ethnic identity in the "nation state" with its composite population and composite culture.

5. In the nineties, the artists of Southeast Asia have broken away from the rigid, conventional idea of seeking their identity in tradition while working in the context of Western art. They have begun to speak freely of problems close to themselves using local techniques and materials. This tendency, as I have described it, signals the end of the framework of "modernity" in Southeast Asian art. The artists of Southeast Asia seem to be embarked on a new search for their identity in a changing reality rather than in past tradition.

(curator, Fukuoka Art Museum / Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)



## Three Generations of Artists Following the Cultural Revolution

Li Xian Ting

1. The "young intellectuals" were graduates of middle and high schools who were sent to work in the farm villages as red guards during the Cultural Revolution. The artists of this generation experienced great psychological stress and they were trained in the painting techniques of revolutionary realism. Their psychological and artistic background was in pure realism, and they became the protagonists of the "Scar" and "Native Soil" art movements. They felt that art should focus on the True and the Good, and their art was characterized by sympathy for the common people and sensitivity toward their hardships. The promises of the Great Cultural Revolution formed the historical background for the appearance of the young intellectuals on the art scene, so the art of the Cultural Revolution became the focus of cultural response for the art of this group of young intellectuals.
2. The second generation initiated the "New Wave" art movement in the mid-eighties. Most of these artists were born in the middle to late 1950s. They were in college in the early eighties when modern Western ideas came flooding into China. They were more or less part of the generation of young intellectuals with experience as Red Guards and working in rural areas, but this experience did not affect them in the same way as it did the earlier generation. It stimulated them to think critically about the past and to be receptive to the new ideas of Western modernism. This was the attitude which characterized their art. The views and linguistic style of Western modernism led them to think about culture from new points of view and to think deeply about human existence from a metaphysical perspective.
3. The third generation of artists are known as "rogues." Most of them were born in the sixties and graduated from college and moved out into society in the late eighties. They were raised in a social environment very different from that of the two previous generations. Beginning in the mid-1970s, when they were entering primary school, they were exposed to rapidly changing ideas. The artists of the previous two generations started their student life under the slogan of saving Chinese culture. In 1989, as the third generation were leaving school, they saw the first "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition containing examples of mostly Western styles of art. Then the June 4th incident (second Tian'anmen incident) put an end to the dream of saving Chinese culture.

The social and artistic situation became confused and fragmented. They could no longer believe in the dream of building a new system of values and saving society and culture. Aware of their own helplessness, they felt they could only save themselves. A sense of malaise became

the most truthful response to the meaningless conditions of existence around them, and it led the new generation of art to abandon idealism and heroism in art. Unlike the two previous generations of artists, who adopted a lofty position with respect to other people, they placed themselves on the same level, coming down to banal reality. With the cynical approach of dealing with the world playfully, they show the boring, spontaneous, and absurd fragments of life in their art, based on a thorough knowledge of themselves and their surroundings.

Another important phenomenon is the birth of Political Pop, a new art style emerging in the nineties in the wake of the great economic changes which are shaking China more forcefully every day. These artists have unintentionally taken a similar path. They ridicule political symbols using popular commercial imagery, restructure socialist images with forms borrowed from Western business culture, expressing a sense of the absurdity of politics which is growing in the minds of young artists.

(art critic/China)

(Translation from the Japanese text by Stanley N. Anderson)



# The Contemporary Art Scene in the Republic of Korea

Ono Ikuhiko

## 1. General Approach

In the nineteenth century, when Europe attempted to order the entire world, including Asia, under the concept of modernity, Asia became aware of itself as an opposing concept. This concept has survived to the present, forming an attitude that might be called "anti-modern," but different from the self-reforming idea of "overcoming the modern" found in Europe. I will explore the Asian characteristics of contemporary art in the Republic of Korea in terms of this attitude.

## 2. Characteristics of Korean Contemporary Art

To quote a classical definition by M. J. Herskovits, "Society is an organization of people; culture is their behavior." Art is a category of culture, and it has its basis in individual societies. Keeping the characteristics of Korean society in mind, I will give an overview of the movements of contemporary art in the Republic of Korea from the postwar period to the early eighties.

## 3. The Minjoong Misul People's Art Movement and the Concept of Modernism

In the early 1980s, an art movement known as Minjoong Misul arose in the Republic of Korea. Based on ethnic pride and socialist ideas, it criticized the glaring social problems which arose in spite of rapid economic growth (maintenance of a military dictatorship; servility to the United States in politics, economics, and culture; the growing gap between rich and poor and between urban and rural areas). This "people's art" made use of street banners, reminiscent of the flags used in traditional Korean ceremonies, as well as murals and prints. Formally, it combined influences from Korean folk art and paintings of the Choson period with socialist realism.

The artists and critics of the Minjoong Misul movement used the word "modernism" as a perjorative term to describe Korean art movements of the eighties other than their own. I believe the Minjoong Misul movement can best be explained by examining what they meant by "modernism." I will introduce Minjoong Misul art as well as other movements of Korean art of the eighties which they criticized as "modernism."

## 4. Recent Korean Art

On the basis of the foregoing sections, I will discuss the situation of contemporary Korean art after the Minjoong Misul movement.

5. Slides

- (1) Several examples of art from major contemporary Korean movements (may be omitted)
- (2) Representative works of Minjoong Misul art (5 or 6 slides)
- (3) "Modernist" art (2 or 3 slides)
- (4) Art of the nineties (2 or 3 slides)

(official, First Cultural Affairs Division Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)



## The Art Scene in Japan

Shioda Junichi

1. It has often been pointed out that the Japanese art world has a double structure. On the one side are conservative exhibiting societies with their members organized into rigid hierarchies, producing traditional Japanese-style painting and an academic style of Western painting which is heavily influenced by Impressionism and Fauvism. On the other side are progressive contemporary artists influenced by current international trends. There is little interaction between these two divisions. The former type of art is more accessible to the general public and overwhelmingly more popular, but the latter reflects the realities of the present age more directly as contemporary form of artistic expression, so that is what I will deal with here.
2. Postwar Japanese artists have searched for their artistic identity, working from their own inner motivations and looking to contemporary conditions, as well as responded to the trends of Western modernism. In many cases this effort has led to rebellion against conventional artistic forms. The avant-garde *Gutai* group organized in the Kansai area in the mid-fifties produced paintings which shared the spirit of the Informalist movement in Europe taking place at the same time, but they also produced works which consisted of primitive physical actions. Between the fifties and the sixties, a great deal of work known as "anti-art" appeared. These assemblages and physical actions using junk and ordinary objects were quite different from conventional paintings and sculpture. While this movement was influenced by American Pop Art, it was fueled by native energy and was a direct expression of the artists' own impulses. The "*Mono-ha*" school of the late sixties and early seventies caused a sensation with its highly reductive approach, presenting such primal materials as iron, wood, and stone with very little manipulation. The "*Mono-ha*" school artists were critical of modernism and attempted to find an original form of expression which fit an oriental context. These movements in postwar Japanese art were characterized by complete denial of the work of previous generations.
3. Since the 1980s, opportunities for the general public to come into contact with contemporary art have gradually increased. A great variety of contemporary exhibitions are being organized by large numbers of art museums and commercial galleries in the large cities. They have attracted a substantial audience and contemporary art is steadily achieving a more established position with the general public. Around 1985, contemporary Japanese artists began to have more opportunities to show overseas, in both group and individual exhibitions, and it has become possible to observe Japanese art from the outside from a more objective point of view. This has

made it possible to consider what is peculiar to Japanese contemporary art and at the same time to consider the nature of its international and universal qualities.

Artists who appeared in the early eighties carried on the tradition of the "*Mono-ha*" school but did so from a critical point of view. They have concerned themselves with Japanese issues, but have achieved an art of universal and international appeal. The younger generation emerging in the late eighties has turned from things to media, focusing on the proliferating signs and information in contemporary society. Although their work seems completely separated from tradition, it is a faithful reflection of the hybrid, borderless condition of today's Japanese culture.

I will only be able to discuss a limited number of artists although there is an incredible variety of expressive forms which cannot be easily organized into a few basic trends. One thing that can be said with certainty is that contemporary Japanese art has been steadily opened up to the outside world during the last decade and this trend is likely to become even stronger as time goes on. As this happens, the artists of Japan will be faced with the problem of achieving universal values in an international context while maintaining qualities unique to Japan.

(curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo/Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)



## History: Steps Towards the Present

Tani Arata

The theme of Session II is "History: Steps Toward the Present." Simply put, this is an examination of the kinds of Western modernism assimilated by the various Southeast and East Asian countries and the steps through which it has passed in reaching the present. Going into this subject in more detail, we will make a comparative analysis between the countries of East Asia and Southeast Asia with reference to differences in the timing of the entrance of Western modernism and the schools of art introduced, the influence of these differences, and the stage of development up to the present. We will consider how "common structures" and "different expressive content" emerged through attempts to make connections with the traditions of each county or region and reassessments of tradition. While comparing the similarities and differences between the countries, we will focus on the question of what Western modernism meant to Asia and the special characteristics in Asian artistic expression to which it led.

After tracing this historical process, we will pass the baton to Session III where problems of the present day will be discussed. Session II should lay the foundation for the next discussion.

I would like to write about the fundamental premises of our discussion which have already been clearly established as a prelude to asking the panelists for their comments. First, although the theme of Session II is an examination of history, it will not be possible to thoroughly analyze every facet of historical developments in all the countries and regions of Asia. Although we are dealing with the category of Southeast Asia, not all of the ASEAN countries are included, let alone many other countries of East, South, and West Asia. A few countries of East and Southeast Asia are represented but there is no one at all from South or West Asia. It is inevitable that this fact be pointed out as problematic. This is a problem that needs to be addressed as improvements are made in future symposiums of this type. I should add that another sort of problem would arise if all the countries of Asia were included. "Asia" was originally and most decisively defined by Westerners, not by Asians. This ultimate difficulty inevitably blurs the focus of this symposium, since the category of Asia is accepted as a self-evident premise and treated here as if it were hardly a problem at all.

The second point that needs to be mentioned is that the theme of Session II is based on the concept of assimilation and transformation of Western influences. To speak of modernism is to speak according to Western standards, and this theme implies that no discussion can proceed outside of this context. This is a difficulty of art related to occidentalism as opposed to orientalism. Edward W. Said's excellent book *Orientalism* has been translated into Japanese and widely read in Japan. It has been criticized for treating Asia as if it were all one and the same while describing Western



policies toward Asia in great detail and from a broad, historical perspective. Critics also say that the viewpoint of the passive side, where Europeanization, whether desired or not, has become established like another tradition over the centuries, is just as important as that of the active side. These differing opinions are like two sides of the same coin since they share a concern with the "eyes of the West on Asia." Speaking honestly, we must admit that Asia has always been an object depending on a Western context. This is an issue which goes beyond the range of art. To deal with it would, in many ways, disrupt progress in the discussion in Session II, but it is necessary to realize that our discussion will take place within the confines of this premise.

The discussion of Session II will take place within the limitations of the error and a certain necessity which makes occidentalism into an unquestioned premise. To make a general prediction, I expect to hear critical opinions on the "Eastern modernism" which has developed historically, deliberately or not, as a form of occidentalism. This applies to the long-term, general development of modernism in all Asian countries following World War II. Viewed more narrowly, it applies to the modernism which entered each country, from its first appearance until the trends of the present, including the movement defined in the West as Postmodernism. One might summarize the situation by saying that Asia is now at a stage where Occidentalism is viewed critically, and this issue is being raised in ways that transcend the limitations of particular regions or countries.

I hope that the panelists will, without ignoring the premise mentioned above, give their own ideas on the position and characteristics of contemporary art in their own countries and throughout Asia, reflecting on the historical process of modernism in their country, but moving beyond its limitations where possible. I hope that they will focus on the following points in carrying out the discussion.

In writing about the Philippines, Alice G. Guillermo applauds the first solo show of Victorio Edades in Manila as the dawn of modernism there. It exemplifies the significance of overcoming the classical expression traditionally found in Western art. Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines saw a rapid spread of modernism thanks to the work of Edades.

- (1) What did Edades achieve? It has been said that he went beyond modernism as a stylistic development inherited from the West, calling for an exploration of "national identity" in making art. What is unique about his artistic expression and the movement he started? How did the seeds sown by Edades change the subsequent history of Philippine art? "National identity" was also involved in the relationship with the Mexican mural movement of the 1930s and the later activities of the modernist group "Thirteen Moderns" which demonstrate the uniqueness of the modernist movement in the Philippines.
- (2) The postwar modernist movements (Neorealism, etc.) seem to have been greatly influenced by the United States. I hope to hear comments on the artistic content of these movements, how they differed from American movements in their methods of interpretation and direction of artistic expression.
- (3) The movements occurring around 1970 showed tendencies similar in many ways to both the West and Japan. One group, known as Interaction, attempted an "interactive mode of



expression." Should their work be categorized as a stylistic innovation? How is it related to the proletariat art which appeared in the 1970s?

- (4) The contemporary art of the Philippines today is often closely tied to art being made in outlying areas such as Baguio and Negros as well as movements in Manila. In some of these areas the art seems to have a radical quality which takes it beyond Manila modernism. How should these new movements be seen? This issue can be related to Ms. Guillermo's view that "identity is endlessly formed through historical processes," transcending what she calls simplistic "subjectivism" or "protection of native peoples."

Jim Supangkat analyzes the history of the assimilation of modernism and the subsequent process of development in Indonesia. He refers to the attitude of the pioneering artist, Sudjojono, clearly demonstrated by the description of his negative reaction to orientalist landscape painting.

- (1) What activities and modes of expression were typical of the Rebel group led by Sudjojono? In particular, it is stated that they did not entirely reject "national identity" and were opposed to universalism. In this respect, Indonesian modernism has grown and developed differently from that of other countries.
- (2) In postwar Indonesian art, schools have been formed which closely reflect the characteristics of particular regions. This is an interesting fact, but what is the reason for this development? There is a tendency for many artists to comply with national cultural policy, but at the same time there are many diverse forms of expression which differ from it. What is the cause of these regional differences?
- (3) The 1970s saw the emergence of the "New Art Movement" which was critical of conventional modernism. It seems to have been a response to real conditions within Indonesia. What were these artists trying to say? What were the features of this movement in comparison to similar movements in other countries.

Li Xian Ting explains the history of modern Chinese art in detail. China was quite different from other countries in terms of the time at which modern art entered the country and the type of art which was accepted. Briefly, modern art first entered the country during the teens of this century and then again in 1979 with the formation of the *Stars* group after a long period which lasted from the establishment of the Communist regime until the end of the cultural Revolution. The history of contemporary avant-garde art has taken place between that year and the present. According to Li, China has "experienced two losses of cultural values and two new cultural syntheses."

- (1) What were the characteristics of the May Fourth Movement which marked the beginning of modernism in China? What meaning did it come to have later?
- (2) What sort of artistic tendencies, still little known in other countries, occurred between the 1930s and the establishment of the Maoist model of art? What has happened to these kinds of art? Although the history of the effects of modernism goes back farther in China than in

Southeast Asia, the trends of real interest have not appeared until the last ten years or so. These movements (such as the '85 New Wave) have developed in a very short period of time, Duchamp and Pop Art being introduced simultaneously. What are the characteristics of new artistic expression and changes in ideas on art which have resulted from this situation?

Ozaki Masato from Japan will comment on the history of Japanese modernism. The history of the assimilation of the West in Japan is quite long in comparison to other Asian countries and cannot be summarized briefly. Therefore, I hope he will focus on the periods which are closely related to the introduction of modernism in the countries of Southeast Asia and China and comment on its subsequent development.

- (1) The 1920s was the initial period of Western modernism in the countries of Southeast Asia when Western art was introduced in various countries at about the same time. I would like to have Ozaki present the main movements and artistic tendencies which occurred in Japan in the twenties and thirties, discussing the psychological motivation of the artists and the historical conditions of this period as well as tracing the changes in art styles.

If possible, I would like to make a comparative examination of the situation of Japanese art and that of other countries in this period based on the statements of the panelists. There are differences in the way the same Western schools were received and established in each region. It may not be possible to examine all these differences in detail during the brief time available in this symposium, but such a discussion would be invaluable in studying the structure and characteristics of the thinking of the people of Asia. Too often, commentary on today's contemporary Asia art lacks this kind of "careful exploration of problems contained in artistic expression." The lack of such an approach often encourages the discussion of contemporary Asian art within the framework of Western concepts and allows it to be reported in a distorted way so that this art is characterized simply as being opposed to Western art. First of all, we need to become aware that this framework has been accepted unconsciously. This is often a problem for the practicing artist as well as for the critic. A strong, obvious message (political, social, or supportive of the traditional culture), which may be of primary importance, is usually conservative and may easily be swallowed up by a system of "production of avant-gardism for consumption."

Although there is no reference to postwar in Ozaki's text, a comparison with the Philippines for the movements of the fifties and sixties may lead to a productive discussion. There are also possible relationships with the Philippines and also with Indonesia in the movements of the seventies. I hope that the situation of Japanese art in these periods will be discussed in terms of differences and similarities to other countries. This should also help to bring out further issues for discussion in Session III.

We have received very fine, carefully-written texts from the panelists who will participate in Session II. They are more than simple reports for a symposium. They are very important documents



for understanding the recent art history of these various countries. I would like to express my personal appreciation for their efforts.

(art critic/Japan)

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)