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Concept of Modernity: Liu Haisu's Path to Reform in Chinese Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Liu Haisu is regarded as one of China's most significant contemporary artists of the last century. He occupies a crucial position in the history of modern Chinese art as an exceptional painter. Liu Haisu skillfully blended the realistic style of traditional Chinese painting with the vibrant colors of Western oil paintings, resulting in a distinctive and powerful fusion of Eastern and Western artistic characteristics and forms. He believed that the reform of modern art must begin with the liberation of the mind. As a young man, he championed the reform of art education and engaged in a battle of ideas with the secular world, striving to challenge the feudal mindset prevalent in China and promote intellectual freedom. This article explores Liu Haisu's concept of 'combining East and West', examining the influence of Western art on his work and his thoughts on the innovation of Chinese art. Additionally, it summarizes the evolution and significance of Liu Haisu's early oil painting style and his perspectives on artistic advancement.

Keywords

Liu Haisu; Chinese Modern Art; Combine Chinese and Western

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, Liu Haisu studied in France and was exposed to Western oil painting techniques and styles. However, he also drew inspiration from traditional Chinese painting, which he had been cultivating for a long time. As a result, Liu Haisu cultivated a unique oil painting style by blending the expressive techniques and color strokes characteristic of Western oil painting with the traditional Chinese landscape format, creating a distinctive synthesis that resonated with both artistic traditions. In the exchange and collision of Chinese and Western cultures, Liu Haisu developed his own unique painting style and artistic improvement ideas. His early oil paintings underwent a gradual transformation in terms of creative background, stylistic characteristics, and artistic concepts.

The influence and significance of these styles and ideas on the development of later generations of Chinese paintings and Chinese contemporary art are noteworthy. He rejects traditional ideas and advocates for progressive artistic thinking, introducing a 'new continent' of expression in contemporary Chinese art that liberates individuality and thought. Liu Haisu contributed significantly to the development of the theoretical system of the Chinese art Renaissance and the integration of Chinese and Western artistic practices. He offered a unique approach to transforming Chinese art from traditional to modern.

1.1 The Birth of the "Traitors of Art" Was the Beginning of Modern Art in China

Born in 1896 in Wujin County, Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, Liu Haisu's early exposure to both traditional

Chinese art and progressive Western ideas set the stage for his transformative role in modern Chinese art (Figure 1). He was a prominent member of the Chinese Democratic League. Liu Haisu was a highly accomplished modern Chinese painter, art educator, and social activist. He was not only proficient in Chinese painting but also in oil painting and calligraphy. Furthermore, he was also well versed in poetry and literature, and was a master of the arts, having created exquisite works in various fields.

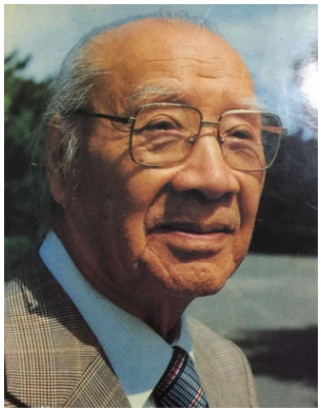

Figure 1. Photo of Liu Haisu in his old age.

Liu Haisu was a pioneering figure in integrating Western artistic concepts into the Chinese painting tradition, uniquely and influentially melding the two art forms. During his studies abroad, particularly in France and Italy, his artistic language matured, leading to the development of a distinctive style (Hu, 2011).

Liu Haisu's early oil paintings represent the nascent stage of Chinese contemporary art. In these works, he deftly fused and transformed traditional Chinese painting with the artistic language of Post-Impressionism. Despite incorporating techniques and language from Post-Impressionism, the traditional Chinese painting style he had learned since childhood remained evident in his work.

In 1912, at the age of seventeen, Liu Haisu (Figure 2) and his classmates established the Shanghai Painting Academy, later renamed the Shanghai Fine Arts College, which became the precursor to today's Nanjing Art Academy. This institution is regarded as the first formal art school in the history of modern Chinese art, marking the beginning of Chinese art education and a seminal moment in its history.

Inspired by Su Shi's metaphor of 'Sending a mayfly to heaven and earth, a small drop in the ocean,' he adopted the name Liu Haisu, symbolizing his dedication to the vast ocean of artistic pursuit. In 1930, while travelling in Europe, he said: "We are originally traitors to tradition, sinners of the world; I can neither live in perfunctory comfort nor can I compromise with conformity. I am very willing to follow the force of my internal life to be a fool that I am used to being ridiculed by people, but I am very willing to follow the force of my internal life to be a fool all my life, nowadays, China is because there are too many people with small means and small abilities, so the society has become so frivolous and shallow" (Liu, 2006).

Figure 2. Liu Haisu at the time of founding the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts.

1.2 The Proud "Sinner of Traditions" or "Traitors of Art"

When Liu Haisu established the Private Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (Figure 3), he created the first coeducational art school in China during the Republic of China era. This allowed Chinese women, who had just been liberated from the "small foot cloth" of the feudal dynasty, to study art alongside men. This was a significant intellectual and artistic revolution in China at the time.

In his 1915 autobiography, Remembering the Passage of Hiring a Living Mannequin, Liu Haisu described the specific events surrounding his first use of a live model: "We hired a fifteen or sixteen-year-old child to be a model in March of that year, in the fourth year of the Republic of China." This event marked a significant breakthrough in modern Chinese art education, moving away from traditional methods and introducing mannequin sketching, which was the beginning of contemporary Chinese art.

In 1920, Liu Haisu further pushed boundaries by employing female models for sketching, incorporating Western art education ideas into his teaching. This bold move caused a nationwide uproar and was widely covered by newspapers. Liu Haisu's actions attracted significant criticism, with many viewing it as a severe breach of social norms. The intense public backlash called for a ban on such practices, and the controversy persisted until 1926.

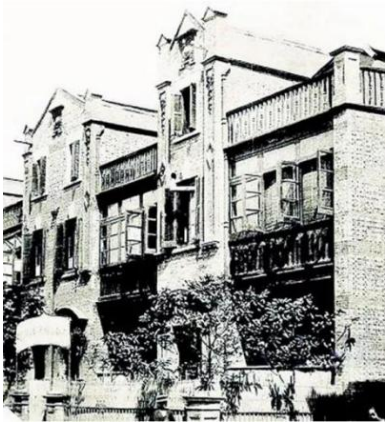

Figure 3. Private Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, 1912.

On June 10, 1926, the "Declaration" published an article titled "Sun Chuanfang and Liu Haisu on the Content of the Model Book," which included a letter dated June 3 from Sun Chuanfang to Liu Haisu. In the letter, Sun urged Liu to abandon drawing course, arguing that while live modeling might be acceptable in the West, China had always emphasized propriety and tradition. He referenced China's four-thousand-year history of valuing modesty and decorum, suggesting that art could still thrive without live modeling. Sun cautioned Liu Haisu to consider the social context and cancel the human body sketching classes.

Liu Haisu asserted that "the model is the soul of art," explaining: "Why must the human body be used as the model in art? All artists will answer in unison: Because the human body is the epitome of beauty. But why is it the most beautiful? To address this, we must first understand what beauty is. This has been a timeless question, with no definitive answer even after thousands of years and countless discussions by scholars. Although opinions vary, they generally agree on two elements of beauty: form and expression. The form is the visible appearance, and the expression is the inner spirit. Thus, form belongs to the object, while expression belongs to the heart. In psychological terms, form is sensation and expression is emotion. The human body embodies both elements, making it the most beautiful."

He highlighted the significance of art and the aesthetic value of using mannequins in fine art. To Liu, the human body is the most beautiful subject, merging emotional depth with physical form. His artistic philosophy is deeply rooted in Western art traditions. It is crucial to recognize that traditional local art had no precedent for nude sketching. In this cultural context, the exposure of the body was viewed not as a sign of sophistication but as a mark of barbarism and ignorance.

His painting style was heavily influenced by Cézanne and Van Gogh, whom he considered his spiritual idols. In his autobiography "Art Traitor", he argued that great artists must possess a strong personality: "Greatness of character is essential for greatness in art." Liu Haisu was convinced that artistic greatness could not stem from mere conformity to social psychology and market trends; instead, it required a bold departure from outdated ideas, embracing a

revolutionary spirit in the art that he himself embodied. Instead, he advocated for an art revolution to usher in modern art. "A truly great artist is one who continuously struggles and innovates, revolutionizing traditional art—such an artist is, indeed, an artistic traitor!" (Liu, 1987).

1.3 Modern Art Is the Expression and Voice of Vitality

Between 1912 and 1921, Liu Haisu dedicated himself to studying Western art, which led to the development of innovative educational ideas and improvements in Chinese art education. This period marked the beginning of his efforts to revolutionize Chinese art, as reflected in his oil paintings.

In 1919, he painted 'The Girl in Fox Skin' (Figure 4), one of the best-preserved examples of his early oil work. Inspired by his wife, this portrait features a young Oriental girl dressed in fox skin, employing light and dark contrasts and spatial perspective to create a strong sense of depth. This painting represents one of his initial forays into Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Although it lacks strong subjectivity, the figure's facial composition displays an Oriental purity while highlighting a Western sense of dignity and elegance. The figure is notably distinct from its background (Guo, 2023, p. 29).

Figure 4. Liu Haisu, Girl in Fox Skin, oil on canvas, 60 cm long, 45.5 cm across, 1919, Collection of the Liu Haisu Museum of Art.

The painting's protagonist embodies the artist's ideal female figure, merging Western-style openness and self-confidence with the introverted and subtle qualities of Oriental beauty. Liu Haisu uses contrasting light and shadow, along with spatial perspective, to create a rich sense of depth and layering. This work represents his early efforts to explore Impressionism and Post-Impressionism while blending Chinese and Western influences. While the painting may not yet exhibit strong subjective expression, it prompts broader reflections on the potential innovations in Chinese painting.

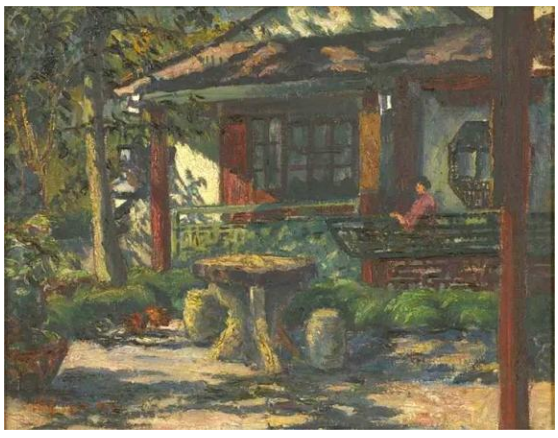

Figure 5. Liu Haisu, Xiling Slanting Sun, oil on canvas, 48 x 63.2 cm, 1919, Collection of Liu Haisu Art Museum.

In 1919, Liu Haisu depicted the scene of a courtyard in a Chinese garden, in a painting called 'Xiling Slanting Sun' (Figure 5). He expressed traditional Chinese elements on canvas in the manner of a Western oil painting, allowing a peek into the collision of Eastern and Western cultural elements. Liu Haisu's incorporation of Monet's technique can be clearly felt in this painting. The sunlight shines in from the left, making the stone table very bright, and the dark pavilion is shaded by the trees in the shaded portion of the painting pulling away the sense of space in front and behind the picture. He boldly uses brushstrokes, similar to the color-breaking method to put together a piece of fragmentary brushstrokes, and strives to restore the most essential feeling of light in the painting.

Figure 6. Nanjing Fuzi Temple, Era: 1925, Size: 64 cm x 89 cm.

The 'Nanjing Fuzi Temple' (Figure 6) is an oil painting by Liu Haisu in his early years. The painting exhibits a style similar to Cézanne's landscape painting. The clumping method of expression is used to draw the volume and depth of the objects. The picture is composed of the relationship between warmth and coldness of colors. Liu Haisu's bold attempts at oil painting pioneered Chinese oil painting and laid a certain foundation for its development.

2. European Landscapes Under the Brush of Liu Haisu

Dispatched by the Chinese government to Europe, Liu Haisu traveled through France, Italy, and other countries to gain a thorough understanding of various Western oil painting genres. He was especially captivated by Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Fauvism, and sought to convey his emotions and thoughts through vibrant colors, dynamic brushstrokes, and bold tones. During his travels, he produced numerous landscapes and figure paintings.

Florence, Italy, known for its rich Renaissance heritage, provided Liu Haisu with exceptional inspiration and a fertile environment for developing artistic ideas and creativity.

The painting 'Fei Lengcui' (Figure 7) derives its name from Xu Zhimo's translation of "Firenze," reflecting the romantic essence of the work. In this piece, Liu Haisu presents an elevated view of Florence's town square. The focal point of the painting is a famous sculpture by Renaissance artist Bologna, depicting the abduction of the Sabine women. Surrounding this sculpture, tourists in various costumes admire and photograph the artwork. The sculpture's use of primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—creates a vivid visual impact in the square. On the left side of the painting, the cast bronze statue of Gatumierda Uffizi on horseback is depicted, while the Old Palace, a symbol of Florence, is shown on the right. Liu Haisu's brushwork effectively captures both elements.

In this painting, Liu Haisu used thick, textured oil paint to define the buildings and sculptures with broad, clear blocks of color. By integrating Cézanne's precise brushwork and structural refinement with Monet's treatment of light and shadow, he utilized color to convey variations in light and depth, resulting in a painting with distinct levels and perspectives.

Between 1929 and 1933, Liu Haisu made two trips to Europe to study painting exhibitions, copy masterpieces, and explore Western styles such as Impressionism, Fauvism, and Expressionism. He drew inspiration from Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse, blending their expressive techniques with the imaginative qualities of Chinese painting. Liu believed that Impressionism and Expressionism aligned more closely with traditional Chinese pictorial art in terms of

artistic thought. His works from this period are characterized by bold, passionate brushstrokes and vibrant colors, creating a striking contrast in his paintings (Guo, 2023, p. 30).

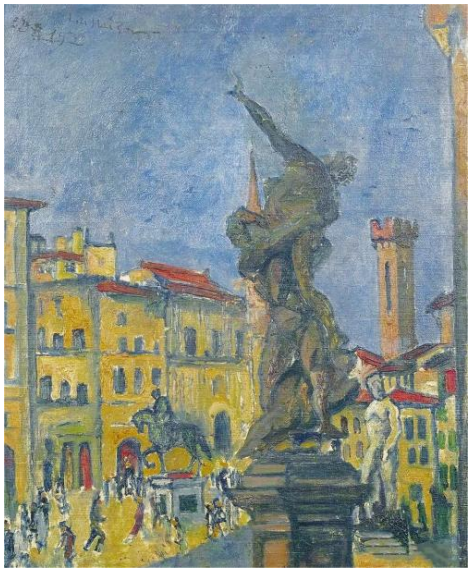

Figure 7. 1930 Liu Haisu, Fei Leng Cui, oil on canvas, 55 cm long, 46.3 cm across, Collection of Liu Haisu Museum of Art.

During his time in Paris, the artist created the famous oil painting 'Sunset over Notre Dame de Paris' (Figure 8). The painting uses a symmetrical composition and warm yellow-green tones to depict Notre Dame at sunset. The main body of the building consists of three pointed arched gates, huge rose windows, a graceful cloister, two bell towers shaped like the capital letter 'H', and a soaring spire. There are many similarities between this painting and Monet's 'Rouen Cathedral' in terms of composition and brushwork. The painting exhibits subdued and balanced colors, heavy and elastic brushwork, and intricate use of color. Upon viewing the painting, the magnificent Gothic architecture that has endured for over 800 years immediately caught our attention.

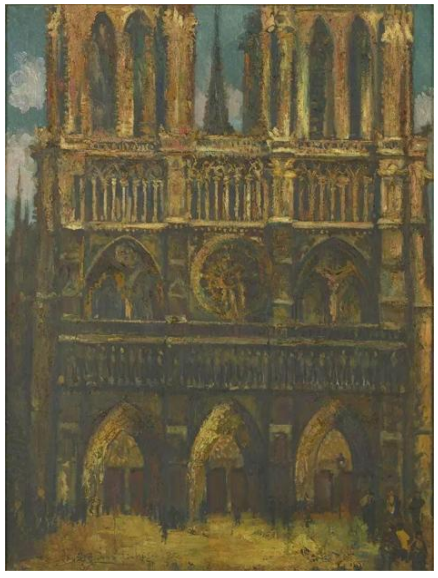

Figure 8. Liu Haisu, Sunset over Notre Dame de Paris, oil on canvas, 92.2 x 89 cm, 1930, Liu Haisu Art Museum.

Furthermore, Liu Haisu created other works such as 'Paris Opera House' (Figure 9), which are currently on display in the 'Stay in France Exhibition'. In 'Paris Opera House', Liu Haisu portrays the vibrant night scene of the opera house with dark green and brown strokes, depicting the lively and bustling crowds and cars passing by.

The Sacré-Coeur Cathedral in Montmartre, north of Paris, is the subject of Liu Haisu's work 'Sacré-Coeur de Paris'

(Figure 10). The painting features a strong expressionist style with overlapping and intermixed long lines and red and green tones, creating a dynamic and flowing world reminiscent of Van Gogh's style. The use of external light adds to the overall effect. The artist has depicted the buildings, plants, and people on the street using brief strokes. Although the strokes may appear rough and messy, the painting is actually vivid and natural.

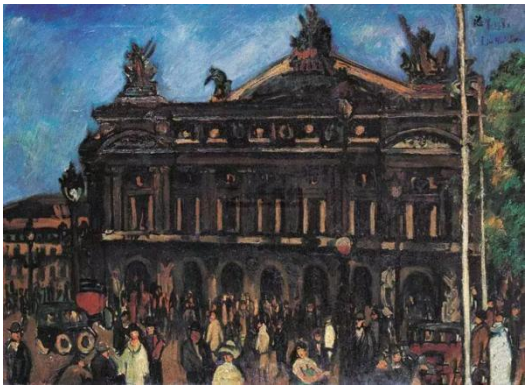

Figure 9. Liu Haisu, Paris Opera House, oil on canvas, 73.5 x 100 cm, 1931, Liu Haisu Art Museum.

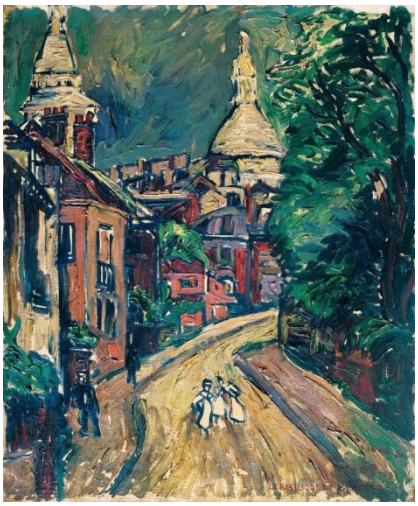

Figure 10. Liu Haisu, Sacré-Coeur de Paris, oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm, 1931, Long Museum of Art.

3. Concept of Integrating East and West in the Renewal of Chinese Contemporary Art

In both his artistic creation and aesthetic education, Liu Haisu pursued Western learning but did not consider Western standards as the sole truth. While he championed Western modern art, he did not forsake Chinese traditions. Instead, he revitalized traditional Chinese art by integrating elements from modern Western art. Liu Haisu believed that employing foreign artistic concepts and moods to express ancient essences could inspire new developments in Chinese painting.

Shi Tao, a late Ming and early Qing dynasty painter, is renowned in Chinese traditional art for moving beyond naturalistic representation to emphasize the artist's deep and vibrant emotions. This approach is seen as a closer reflection of art's essence and life's vitality. Liu Haisu noted that Shi Tao's work incorporated natural elements and a macrocosmic perspective. He also compared Shi Tao's style with that of Western Late Impressionists. Liu Haisu himself worked in both Chinese and oil painting, with his Chinese works drawing from Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasty styles as well as Western techniques.

In his sketch 'Yellow Mountain' (Figure 11), Liu Haisu used traditional Chinese painting techniques to leave white space, effectively capturing the ethereal, mist-filled landscape.

'Red Lotus with Cui Feathers' (Figure 12) is a masterpiece from Liu Haisu's later years, showcasing his mastery of ink and color. This painting highlights one of Liu's favorite subjects, the lotus. The composition is dense, filling the

entire frame with the vibrant life of the lotus pond. The red lotus flowers stand tall in the water, while a pair of mandarin ducks play, creating a lively and natural scene. The contrast between the detailed imagery and the splashes of color captures the immediacy of the foreground and the depth of the background. The mandarin ducks beneath the lotus leaves add a finishing touch, their lively postures bringing an extra element of interest to the work.

Figure 11. Liu Haisu, Yellow Mountain, oil on canvas, 54 x 43.5 cm, 1935, Collection of Liu Haisu Art Museum.

Figure 12. Liu Haisu, Red Lotus with Cui Feathers, 143cm x 80.4cm, 1979, Collection of National Art Museum of China.

Upon viewing the painting, one may notice elements of Western modern art in its vibrant and clear colors, as well as resemblances to Shi Tao's works. However, neither Western nor Chinese artistic traditions alone can fully capture its beauty. This distinctiveness is Liu Haisu's hallmark. He delves into the intersections of Chinese and Western art,

seeking their shared qualities. His work embodies both the essence of artistic expression and the individuality and emotion of the artist. Through this exploration, he has pioneered new paths for Chinese painting and expanded its visual language (Zhang, 2022, p. 12).

'Yellow Mountain Scattered Flowers Dock' (Figure 13), created in 1954, represents the pinnacle of Liu Haisu's landscape paintings of Yellow Mountain. It captures the clear, enchanting scenery of Yellow Mountain in misty rain. His method of composition, which borrows the grandeur of panoramic views, renders the scene both full and transparent.

Figure 13. Liu Haisu, Yellow Mountain Scattered Flowers Dock, 135cm x 65.6cm, 1954, Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

This painting portrays a landscape with towering stones, a winding stream, and tall pine trees. The scene is brought to life with details, including people walking through the forest after a day of labor. In the middle ground, strange peaks and lush vegetation are visible, while the distant view shows mountain tops shrouded in clouds and mist. The landscape is divided into three interconnected and permeable sections, creating a sense of depth and distance. Although the painting does not explicitly depict light and rain, their presence can be felt, reminiscent of the mood found in Song Dynasty artworks. Additionally, the piece incorporates expressive techniques from Western painting, resulting in noticeable changes in the sense of space and volume compared to traditional Chinese painting (Zhang, 2022, p. 11).

Liu Haisu's 'Yellow Mountain and Sea of Clouds' (Figure 14) exemplifies the fusion of Chinese and Western techniques. The artist uses post-impressionist brushstrokes to depict object volume and the relationship between warm and cool colors in modeling. The impressionist sense of light is employed to express the scenery of Huangshan Mountain, while traditional Chinese blue and green landscape painting characteristics are also present (Zhang, 2022, p. 13).

Figure 14. Liu Haisu, Sea of Clouds on Yellow Mountain (oil on canvas) 61.3cm x 74.2cm, 1954, Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

4. Conclusion

Liu Haisu gradually merged life, art, beauty, and personality, elevating art to a transcendental value by uniting beauty and goodness. This synthesis is seen as a new modern faith, reflecting Liu Haisu's style of blending Eastern and Western influences while emphasizing individuality and the emotional power of artistic expression (Feng, 2022).

While influenced by Western modern art, Liu Haisu also embraced the Chinese tradition of "introducing the West and enriching China." His approach to Chinese painting signifies a break from tradition, guiding the evolution of modern painting trends. His profound understanding of the aesthetic principles of traditional Chinese painting forms the theoretical basis for the modern Chinese painting he championed. By naming himself Haisu, meaning "a drop in the ocean," he acknowledged the relative insignificance of individual effort against the vastness of the world. The modernization of Chinese art, as exemplified by Liu Haisu's oeuvre, is an ongoing, dynamic process. It is a testament to the cumulative efforts of visionaries like Liu Haisu, whose work continues to inspire and challenge the boundaries of artistic expression in China and beyond. This journey is lengthy and demands ongoing effort. The modernization of fine arts is an ongoing process, and the pursuit of Chinese-style modernization continues (Chen, 2023).

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