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An Album of Contemporary Chinese Paintings

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# **An Album of Contemporary Chinese Paintings**





#### **Preface**

During the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960–1279), poet and painter Su Shi (1037–1101) and others began to convey personal feelings by portraying landscape, flowers, birds, trees and rocks, thus planting the seeds of literati painting. In the following Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), mostly owing to the artistic experiments of painter Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), this new art genre had rapidly reached its maturity. However, after its further development in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the creation of literati paintings gradually revealed a certain trend toward formulism under the brushes of the four Wangs, namely Wang Shimin (1592–1680), Wang Jian

(1598–1677), Wang Shigu (1632–1717), and Wang Yuanqi (1646–1715), all court painters of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), -- which had invited widespread criticisms. During the New Culture Movement (1915–1919) hosts of Chinese painters went to Japan and Europe to learn painting, and used the Western experiences in modeling and coloring for reference in an effort to reform China's traditional painting techniques.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the notion of "art must serve for the people" became orthodox and dominant, and as the Central Academy of Fine Arts introduced the former Soviet Union's teaching pattern into

China and lifted sketching to a supreme position, the genre of figure painting reflecting real life prospered at the expense of traditional landscape and flower-and-bird paintings. Despite painter Pan Tianshou (1891–1971)'s adherence to the traditional ink and wash method, the general trend of the times could not be changed, and as a result, in today's China there are few painters who can rival the ancient master artists in describing mountains, waters, flowers and birds.

Unlike in the early 20th century or the initial days of the republic, the creation of contemporary Chinese paintings has seen a free development of various forms and styles. Of course a majority of the artists are still following the Western techniques, but some have tried to

go back to the ink and wash method to express modern artistic concepts, leading to a genre of "neo-literati painting" -- a cultural phenomenon arising in the late 1980s and early 90s.

Gratifyingly, contemporary Chinese painters are becoming more and more interested in learning the national culture. By and large, comparing with their predecessors, they have a more sober view on assimilating the essence of traditional Chinese painting whilst drawing upon Western techniques. Therefore we have enough reason to predict that a new upsurge in the creation of Chinese paintings will come soon.

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Figure Paintings

Traditionally, ancient Chinese figure painters often depicted somewhat stereotyped images of court ladies, hermits, or scholar officials. This situation did not change until the early 20th century when the Western realistic way of painting was introduced into China. The largesized "Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains" made by Xu Beihong (1895-1953) in 1940 with a Western composition stands out as a milestone in the creation of figure paintings in modern China. And the "Portrait of Refugees" by Jiang Zhaohe (1904–1986) following Xu's artistic style has been rated as another masterpiece describing real-life circumstances and reflecting the weal and woe of the people.

After 1949, Fang Zengxian and others from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (the predecessor of today's China Academy of Art) took people's life and the newly-established republic's industrial and agricultural production as material for their works, thus forming the so-called "Zhejiang school of figure painting" that had a

widespread influence at that time.

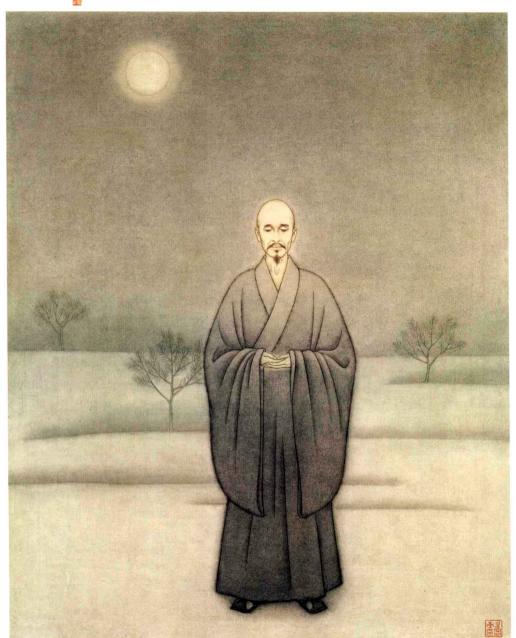
Equipped with good sketching techniques, contemporary Chinese figure painters are able to create themed works of huge size that are full of zeitgeist. Under their brushes, the figures are painted in more accurate proportions.

Nevertheless, having long neglected the training of calligraphy and possessing very little knowledge of the national culture, a majority of them show poor skill in drawing pictures with ink and brush. In many cases, their works look more like oil paintings made on *Xuan* paper that has been traditionally used for Chinese painting and calligraphy.

A further development for Chinese figure painting must be based on the re-recognition of the ink and brush technique, which requires contemporary painters to get a deeper understanding of Chinese history and traditional culture and enhance their artistic accomplishments.



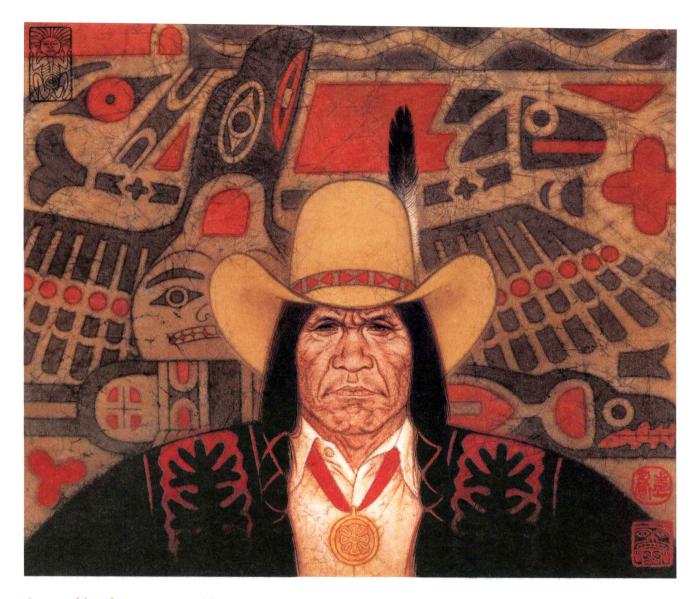
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Portrait of Master Hongyi Gu Shengyue 82 × 64 cm Color on paper, 1999

Master Hongyi (1880-1942), whose original name is Li Shutong, was born in a banker's family in north China's Tianjin City. In 1905 he went to Japan to study at Tokyo School of Fine Arts majoring in oil painting. After returning to China in 1910, he taught painting and music in Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou, and was the first Chinese art teacher to use nude models. His students included painter Feng Zikai (1898-1975) and musician Liu Zhiping (1894-1978) who later became famous all over the country. In August 1918 Li Shutong went to Hupao Temple in Hangzhou to become a Buddhist priest.

Gu Shengyue was born in Zhoushan of Zhejiang Province in 1927. In this picture drawn in a simple but meaningful style, a bright moon is hanging in the sky, producing a lofty artistic ambience to imply Master Hongyi's peaceful mind.



Approaching the American Indians Gu Shengyue 57 × 66 cm Color on paper, 2005 After attending several gatherings of the Indians when visiting the United States, painter Gu has been deeply impressed by their long history, ancient culture, and unsophisticated but inflexible character, and created a series of paintings entitled "Approaching the American Indians" after returning home. This is one of them: both the figure in the foreground and the Indian fresco in the background produce a solemn and powerful artistic effect.