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THE MONUMENTAL LANDSCAPES OF LI HUAYI
February 6–May 9, 2004

The Asian Art Museum explores the fundamental question: “What is contemporary art?” through a solo artist’s exhibition of paintings that build from ancient traditions

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, DECEMBER 10, 2003: Some view contemporary art and traditional art as alien entities facing each other across an unbridgeable divide. But what does it mean to be a “contemporary artist”? Is it possible to be contemporary while working in a traditional manner? These questions as they relate to the contemporary scene in China are explored in *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi*, the Asian Art Museum’s special exhibition featuring 34 large-scale paintings by Li Huayi, an artist born and raised in China, and currently residing in Shanghai and San Francisco. Many of the works in this exhibition could, on first view, be mistaken for traditional Chinese paintings such as those from the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). On closer inspection, however, the viewer discovers the technical innovations—and personal expression—that the artist has brought to this tradition. For Li Huayi is expressly not an artist who is seeking to imitate or reproduce works from the past but rather one who uses tradition to create new works that speak to our time. On view from February 6 through May 9, 2004, *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi* was organized by the Asian Art Museum and curated by Dr. Michael Knight, the museum’s senior curator of Chinese art. The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color 144-page catalogue.

“The museum believes it is important to showcase Li Huayi’s work because it reveals that the relationships between the past, present, and future of Chinese art are profound and complex,” says museum director Emily Sano. “He skillfully draws upon the Chinese monumental landscape tradition of the Northern Song dynasty and creates unique and moving works that transcend time, space, and nationality. The impact is powerful, and immensely satisfying.”

Born to a wealthy family in Shanghai in 1948, Li was exposed to traditional Chinese art at an early age. He began to study painting in the “big brush” style of the Shanghai school when he was six. Looking for other sources of inspiration, Li began a serious study of Western painting and drawing, eventually becoming accomplished in these styles. His flexibility and range of talent allowed him to survive the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) relatively unscathed; he spent the decade as a “worker artist,” producing large propaganda paintings in social realist style.

Li came to San Francisco in 1982, and he received his Master of Fine Arts degree at the Academy of Art College two years later. During the 1980s he experimented with ink and collage, drawing on sources ranging from ancient Chinese Buddhist frescoes, archaic pictograms, and Chan

calligraphy to Romanesque art, the works of Paul Klee, and abstract expressionism. Since then Li's paintings have revealed a deepening exploration of his complex background. Much to the amazement of tradition-based art historians, Li now works in a painstaking brush style that combines influences from Northern Song monumental landscape painting with his own interests in contemporary art and his physical surroundings. The resulting masterworks represent the culmination of a profound personal search for genuine artistic style and meaning.

Although Li Huayi's paintings could serve as a bridge between the arts of China and of the West, Li has carefully and intentionally avoided becoming a Western modernist, opting instead to become a contemporary Chinese painter. He views and admires modern Western works through the lens of the Chinese tradition, relating to them in terms of Chinese painting and calligraphy techniques such as brush touch and movement. "Many people think tradition is a horrible thing. I do not believe this," explains Li. "I think being contemporary means communicating your spirit, being responsible to other people, and being true to yourself and your time.... If you want to create something, you base it on yourself, your own situation, your own cultural background, your own tradition. Art can be traditional and still be contemporary." For instance, Li does not deny the influence of abstract expressionism on the splashed ink technique he employs to create the basic forms of his landscapes, but he continues to seek philosophical and artistic foundations in the Chinese tradition for his personal explorations. The method he uses to manipulate the ink on the paper is his own innovation, however; he uses a broad, flat brush to spread the ink and also controls its spread by moving the paper one way or another.

The presentation of *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi* begins with two propaganda posters from the artist's personal collection that were produced during the Cultural Revolution. While a "worker artist," Li was responsible for re-creating such posters as large murals on the exterior of buildings throughout China. The remainder of the exhibition charts the development of the artist from that point to the present. The earliest of Li's paintings in the exhibition is entitled "Guanyin" (1981). The painting demonstrates a style heavily influenced by the characteristics of sixth-century cave paintings in Dunhuang, China; these works are noted for their opaque colors and stylistic elements. Li's current landscapes hint at this stage of his stylistic past in their use of opaque pigments particularly for trees and highlighted areas in his darker paintings. When Li immigrated to the United States in 1982, he experimented with using ink in large areas his painting's surface in order to create dynamic abstract forms. For contrast he created motifs in finer, more detailed brushwork and occasional strong colors, some of which he used in his Dunhuang paintings. Li searched for components in traditional Chinese art that he thought could be treated abstractly, including images from Neolithic pottery, characters in Bronze Age scripts, and details from ancient stone carvings and paintings in lacquer. He developed the compositions to highlight these elements and in some cases

created the elements separately and collaged them onto the surface. The exhibition includes two works created in this style.

The remaining paintings in the exhibition focus on the evolution of Li's landscapes. *Spirit Landscape with White Trees* (1993)—one of his earliest landscapes—reveals elements of previous styles: large areas of splashed ink, ancient calligraphy and opaque pigments for trees. In contrast *Early Winter* (2003) shows how Li's work has progressed over the past ten years. The influence of Northern Song monumental landscapes, considered the pinnacle of Chinese landscape painting, is apparent. Li's reasons for the Northern Song style being the origin for his current inspiration are many. For one, he cites the pure visual appeal of these imposing landscapes. In his paintings he both strives for the same monumental impact from afar and pays attention to the minute details in order to make possible a closer perspective. For the detail work Li demonstrates his technical mastery by using brush styles and ink tonalities that follow traditional standards. He also is drawn to the purity of Northern Song style landscapes. Li mirrors this style and omits the human element in his paintings; renderings of pristine, idyllic, and timeless environments are the result. Large in scale and concept, and detailed and time-consuming in execution, Li's paintings strive for the majesty and drama of Northern Song works. He creates his imaginative landscapes on large canvases, using innovative formats and techniques to develop a style all his own.

The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi is the second in an ongoing series of contemporary art exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum's new facility at Civic Center. "Exhibiting contemporary Asian art is a venture the museum embraces with enthusiasm," says Director Emily Sano. "We intend our mixture of group exhibitions and solo shows to reflect variety in both gender and age; at the same time the first criterion of selection will always be the quality of the work. Through these programs we hope we can contribute to an international dialogue about art in our own age and to an understanding of what defines or distinguishes the art being produced by Asians and Asian Americans now." The next exhibition in the series, *Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind*, opens February 27, 2004, and runs through May 23, 2004.

Moons, Mountains and Modern Landscape: Chinese Paintings from the Museum's Collection

To supplement the special exhibition *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi*, which is in the Hambrecht and Osher galleries on the ground floor, the Chinese paintings on view in the museum's collection galleries (Galleries 18 and 19, located in the northwest corner of the museum's second floor) from December 2003 through June 2004 focuses on twentieth-century landscape painting. *Moons, Mountains and Modern Landscape: Chinese Paintings from the Museum's Collection* features more than twenty works by Li Huayi's contemporaries and their predecessors. The installation addresses the development of landscape painting in China and beyond its borders in Hong Kong, Taiwan and even the United States. All works on view in these galleries are from the museum's collection, and many are recent acquisitions that have never been on view at the museum.

Gallery 18 will include works by Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), Wu Guanzhong (born 1919), Lu Yanshao (1909–1992), Huang Zhongfang (aka Harold Wong, born 1943), and C.C. Wang (1907–2003), among others. Gallery 19 will focus on Hong Kong artist Chao Shao-an (1905–1998), and his students as well as other artists from Hong Kong.

Media Preview

A media preview for *The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi* will be held on Thursday, February 5, 2004, from 9:30 AM to 12:00 noon, with a gallery walk-through at 10:00 AM led by Dr. Michael Knight, curator of the exhibition. Complimentary refreshments will be served. Please RSVP to pr@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3717.

The Monumental Landscapes of Li Huayi exhibition and catalogue are made possible by grants from the W.L.S. Spencer Foundation, the Rosenkranz Foundation, and Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 15,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library by acclaimed architect Gae Aulenti (designer of the Paris's Musée d'Orsay, Paris) into a showcase for the museum's renowned collection and exhibitions.

Visiting the Museum:

Overlooking Civic Center Plaza, the new Asian Art Museum is located at 200 Larkin Street, between Fulton and McAllister Streets. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM, with extended evening hours until 9:00 PM every Thursday. Closed Mondays. Regular admission is \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$6 for youths 12–17, and free for children under 12. Complimentary audio tours of the museum's collection galleries are available upon request. For group visits and rates, please call (415) 581-3624. The new location offers greater access to Bay Area residents and visitors via BART, MUNI, Sam Trans, Golden Gate Transit, and the Bay Bridge. Parking is available in the nearby Civic Center Garage and other paid parking facilities in the neighborhood. **For more information, please call (415) 581-3500, or visit www.asianart.org.**

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500 or www.asianart.org
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM, with extended hours Thursdays until 9:00 PM. Closed Mondays.
- **Admission:** \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors, \$6 for youths 12–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 PM admission is just \$5 for all visitors except members and those under 12, who are always admitted free.
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.