

Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻:¹ In Question 惑²

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中國有破天荒之全國美術展覽會，可雲喜事，值得稱賀。而最可稱賀者，乃在無腮惹納（Cézanne）、馬梯是（Matisse）、薄奈爾（Bonnard）等無恥之作。（除參考品中有一二外）

Holding China's inaugural National Exhibition of Art is a joyous occasion deserving appraisal.³ But the most laudable aspect is that there will not be any artwork by shameless artists such as Cézanne, Matisse or Bonnard put on display (except for only a few which will be used for reference).

美術之所以能安慰吾人者，乃在其自身之健全。故需一智之藝。Art savant 若必醉心 Archaisme（簡陋之原人學術）亦只可就其質而擷取其包含之善材，供吾作原料。終不當頭腦簡單，而返乎原始時代之生。（中國之不善學北碑者亦生此病）

Due to its complexity, fine art is able to soothe all of us. Therefore, it is necessary to develop knowledge of art. If the artists who deal with *l'art savant*⁴ (the high art) are fascinated with *archaïsme*⁵ (the simple and crude science of the primitive man), they can only select advantageous materials based on their aesthetics to create artworks. Unfortunately, they

¹ Translator's note: Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻: Born in 1895 in Jiangsu Province, Xue was a painter who used both the styles of traditional Chinese painting and Western painting in his artwork. He studied French at Zhendan University in Shanghai before going to Paris in 1919 where he enrolled at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. He also travelled to other European countries, as well as to Japan, and Southeast Asia. He then worked as a teacher in Beijing, Chongqing, Nanjing, and West Bengal (India). A "strenuous opponent of Western modernism", Xu Beihong "made notable progress in combining Western realism" with the techniques of traditional Chinese painting. (See: Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 185-186.)

² Translator's note: This article, titled *Huo 惑* (translated as "Perplexity" by David Der-wei Wang) was written by Xu Beihong and published in 1929 in the fifth issue of the journal *Art Exhibition* (Meizhan). In the text, Xu writes that he is happy the inaugural National Exhibition of Art "features no works by such shameless painters as Cezanne and Matisse" and criticizes Chinese painters who "blindly followed the western modernist trends". The article soon induced a rejoinder titled *Wo ye "huo" 我也 "惑"* (translated by David Der-wei Wang as "I Too Am Perplexed") written by Xu Zhimo. (David Der-wei Wang, "In the Name of the Real," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, edited by Maxwell K. Hearn, Judith G. Smith and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 29.)

³ Translator's note: The National Exhibition of Art 全國美術展覽會: In April 1929, the Ministry of Education of the Nationalist Government held China's first National Exhibition of Art in Shanghai. More than 2000 exhibits were on display, including paintings, arts and crafts, sculptures and architecture pieces. (See: Zheng Gong, *Yanjing yu yundong: Zhongguo meishu de xiandaihua (1875-1976)* 演進與運動: 中國美術的現代化 (1875-1976) [Evolution and Movements: Modernization of Chinese Art (1875-1976)], (Nanning: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2002), 102.)

⁴ Translator's note: *High art* (French: *l'art savant*): High art refers to the art of an upper class such as an aristocracy or an intelligentsia. It is contrasted with the popular art. (See: William Irwin, Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 41.)

⁵ Translator's note: *Archaïsme* (French: *archaïsme*): Archaïsme is the use of old-fashioned art techniques with the attempt to revitalize early art. (See: Kenneth Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox* (Brown Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 3.)

have to return to a primitive life due to their simple-mindedness. (Those in China who are inept in studying the inscriptions of the Northern Dynasty (*Beibei* 北碑) may also be destined to do so.)⁶

法國派之大，乃在其容納一切。如吾人雖有耳目之聰明，同時身體上亦藏糞汁之污垢。如普呂動 (Prud'hon) 之高妙，安葛爾 (Ingres) 之華貴，特拉克羅利 (Delacroix) 之壯麗，畢于維史 (Puvis de Chavannes) 之偉大，薄奈 (Bonnat)、愛耐 (Henner) 之堅卓敏銳，干連 (Carrière) 之飄渺虛和，達仰 (Dagnan-Bouveret)、白司姜勒班習 (Bastien-Lepage) 及愛倍爾 (Hebert) 之精微幽深，穀洛 (Corot) 之逸韻，倍難爾 (Besnard) 之渾博，薄特理 (Baudry) 之清雅，呂特 (Rude) 之強，駱蕩 (Rodin) 之雄，幹爾波 (Carpeaux) 之能，米萊 (Millet) 之蒼莽沉寂，穆耐 (Monet) 之奇變瑰麗，又沉著茂密如孤而倍 (Courbet)，詭詭滑稽如陀綿 (Daumier)，揮灑自如如穆落 (Morot)，便捷輕利之特茄史 (Degas)，神秘如穆羅 (Moreau)，博精動物如排理 (Barye)，雖以馬耐 (Manet) 之庸，勒奴幻 (Renoir) 之俗，腮惹納 (Cézanne) 之浮，馬梯是 (Matisse) 之劣，縱悉反對方向所有之惡性，而藉賣畫商人之操縱宣傳，亦能震撼一時，昭昭在人耳目。歐洲自大戰以來，心理變易。美術之尊嚴蔽蝕，俗尚競趨時髦。幸大奇之保存，得見昔人至德。降及今日，生存競爭激烈，無暇治及高深。是乃變象，並非進程。(非謂遂無進步，顧絕非彼輩) 若吾東人尤而效之，則恰同西人欲傳播中國學術于歐土，而刺探綦詳黃慧如事蹟，以掩飾渾體糊塗，不可笑耶？

The prominence of the French school lies in its all-inclusiveness. As human beings, we are endowed with acute capabilities of hearing and seeing, yet, at the same time, we are defiled by the faeces and urine held in our bodies. Let us take for example Prud'hon's⁷ masterly performance, Ingres' luxuriousness, Delacroix' magnificence, Puvis de Chavanne's grandness, Bonnat's and Henner's unyielding and outstanding acuteness, Carrière's ethereal and pious nature, Dagnan-Bouveret's, Bastien-Lepage's, and Hebert's shared tacit profundity, Corot's outstanding charm, Besnard's sublimity, Baudry's refined elegance, Rude's powerfulness, Rodin's heroism, Carpeau's potency, Millet's boundless reticence, Monet's versatility and extraordinariness, as well as the calmness and complexity of Courbet, the weird grotesqueness of Daumier, the unconstrained effortlessness of Morot, the wittiness of Degas, the mysteriousness of Moreau, the expertise in animals of Barye, in addition to Manet's mediocrity, Renoir's vulgarity, Cézanne's superficiality, and Matisse's inferiority—

⁶ Translator's note: *Beibei* 北碑 (inscriptions of the Northern dynasties): *Beibei*, also called *weibei* (魏碑), refers to inscriptions on Chinese steles in the Northern dynasties. These inscriptions are regarded as exemplars of traditional Chinese calligraphic scripts. (See: Chen Tingyou 陳廷祐, *Zhongguo shufa* 中国书法 [Chinese Calligraphy] (Beijing: Wuzhou chuanbo chubanshe, 2003), 108.)

⁷ Translator's note: Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758-1823) was a French painter who was well-known for his "allegorical paintings and portraits". He was widely considered an artist of Romanticism owing to the "melancholy" and "dreaminess" of his paintings. He went to Paris in 1780 and stayed in Italy from 1784 to 1878. He gained membership in the "Institute de France" in 1816. (See: *Pierre-Paul Prud'hon: 100 Master Drawings*, Blagoy Kiroff) (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), foreword.)

even if we know about all the viciousness we are so opposed to, due to the art dealers' insulting manipulations and promotions, their artworks made them famous, drawing people's attention overnight. The ideology of Europe has changed since the Great War. A blind following of trends eroded the dignity of fine arts. Fortunately, some of the most prominent art has been preserved and we are still able to see the highest standards of our forerunners. At present, since life is so competitive, artists have no time for inquiring into the profound. All of this is by no means an evolution but just a changing phenomenon. (One cannot progress unless they become well-known, however, this does not apply to our forerunners.) If we, Eastern people, follow the trends to cover up our foolishness, it is as ridiculous as the Westerners' attempt to promote Chinese ideology in Europe. It is like attempting to probe into the highly detailed Huang Huiru 黃惠如 case—would this not be ridiculous?⁸

新派中自有巨人。如畢于維史 (Puvis de Chavannes)、駱蕩 (Rodin)、干連 (Carrière)、穆耐 (Monet)、及尚在之倍難爾 (Besnard)。又如點派之瑪律當 (Martin) 及安茫象 (Aman-Jean)、西蒙 (Simon)、勃郎雪 (Blanche) 亦卓絕有獨造。顧最膾炙人口之美術家，多帶幾分商業性質。奈黃面人受 (Paul Durand-Ruel) (大畫商) 一類人愚弄，以市面上無德之 Menzel, Leibl, 比之 St bats, Lys 西班牙之 Sorolla, 瑞典之 Zorn, 義大利之 Boldini、Tito、Sartorio, 英之 Sargent, 美國籍 Br ngwyn, 匈加利之 Munkácsy (皆革新不可一世之大家) 之作。其名於是杳焉無聞。若吾國革命政府啟其天縱之謀，偉大之計，高瞻遠矚，竟抽煙賭雜稅一千萬元，成立一大規模之美術館，而收羅三五千元一幅之腮惹納、馬梯是之畫十大間。(彼等之畫一小時可作兩幅) 為民脂民膏計，未見得就好過買來路貨之嗎啡海綠茵。在我徐悲鴻個人，卻將披髮入山，不願再見此類卑鄙昏聩黑暗墮落也。吾滋願吾敬愛之中國藝人，憑吾國天賦造物之繁，有徐熙、黃筌、易元吉、錢舜舉等大師，並與吾人以新生命工力湛深遺世獨立之任伯年，不願再見毫無真氣無願力一種 *Art Conventional* 之四王充塞，及外行而主畫壇之吳昌老。式微式微，衰落已極。願吾國藝術趨向光明正大之途。以紹吾先人非功利 (此為吾中國美術之特點。美術之共同條件固有非功利，但在他國，恒有求福邀功之跡。不若中國人寫花鳥作山水惟抒情寄美感) 之偉跡。而使一切買賣商人，無所施其狡獪也。(此亦過慮，但勢所必然。) 志摩兄：承再三眷念，感激萬分。顧百花開放，難以同時，比來意興都盡，其不參與盛會，並無惡意。

There are giants among the modernists, such as Puvis de Chavannes, Rodin, Carrière, Monet, and Besnard. Among the neo-impressionists (*dian pai* 點派) Martin and Aman-Jean,

⁸ Translator's note: *Huang Huiru* 黃慧如: Huang Huiru was a widely known woman during the Republican period of China. As rumour had it, having a background of a wealthy family, Huang Huiru had an affair with her brother's servant Lu Genrong after her engagement with another man was broken. Her pregnancy in addition to her brother's lawsuit against Lu Genrong made her story widely talked-about in the media. (See: Wen-hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendour: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China 1843-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 113.)

Simon and Blanche are also known for their unique styles.⁹ However, art by artists appealing to the masses is commercialized in one way or another. How unfortunate it is that the yellow-faced people (*huang mian ren* 黃面人) are fooled by art dealers the likes of Paul Durand-Ruel. Consequently, there is no art on the market by such ground-breaking and exceptional artists as Germany's Menzel and Leibl, Belgium's St Bats¹⁰ by Lys,¹¹ Spain's Sorolla, Sweden's Zorn, Italy's Boldini, Tito and Sartorio, England's Sargent, USA's Brngwyn,¹² and Hungary's Munkácsy. As a result, all of these artists are seldom known. If our country's revolutionary government (*geming zhengfu* 革命政府)¹³ was ever tempted to come up with high-level strategies, master plans, or visionary foresight, it would go as far as to collect ten million *yuan* from opium, gambling and various other taxes in order to establish an extensive art museum. It would also collect three or five thousand *yuan* and acquire tens of paintings by Cezanne and Matisse. If the "flesh and blood of the people (*minzhi mingao* 民脂民膏)" is spent on purchasing works of art which can be made as easy as falling off a log, it would be the same as spending the money to purchase imported morphine and heroin.¹⁴ I, Xu Beihong, would rather let my hair grow and go to live as a hermit up the mountains (*pifa rushan* 披髮入山) than witness such despicable corruption and degeneration ever again.¹⁵ Among an existing variety of natural talents in our nation, I adore and admire Chinese masters (*yi ren* 藝人)¹⁶

⁹ Translator's note: *Dianpai* 點派 (neo-impressionism): Neo-impressionism focuses on Seurat and the pointillist /divisionist technique. It uses a systematic approach to form and colour, particularly using pointillist technique that emerged in the late 1870s. (See: Mckeever, Rosalind. *Neo-impressionism and anarchism in fin-de-siecle France: Painting, Politics and Landscape* by Robyn Roslak. Art Book 15 no.3, 2008), 35.)

¹⁰ Translator's note: No information can be found about "st bats", which is written in English in the original text. However, we suspect it may refer to a painting.

¹¹ Translator's note: we cannot confirm the existence of an artist known as "Lys".

¹² Translator's note: The artist Xu Beihong referred to as "Br ngwyn" may refer to Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956), also known as Sir Frank William Brangwyn. He was a British watercolourist and painter of murals, examples of which are to be found in London and Missouri. (See: Stangos, Nikos. *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art and Artists* (Thames & Hudson, 1994), 59.) However, we think the nationality of Brangwyn may be incorrect in the original text.

¹³ Translator's note: *Gemingzhengfu* 革命政府: *Gemingzhengfu* is translated as the revolutionary government in this article, however David Der-wei Wang translated this the Nationalist government. (See Wang 2001, 29).

¹⁴ Translator's note: *Minzhimingao* 民脂民膏 (flesh and blood of the people): *Minzhimingao* refers to people's wealth gained from their hard work. (See: Xiaoqing, Zhao and Ying, Li. *Shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan wenhua duben, weiyandayi* 中國社會主義核心價值觀文化讀本, 微言大義 [A book of the culture of core socialist values—small words with deep meanings] (Beijing, 2016), 99.)

¹⁵ Translator's note: *Pifa Rushan* 披髮入山: It means that one lets one's hair continue to grow, leaves the secular world and lives in seclusion. (See: Han da chengyu da cidian 漢大成語大詞典 [Chinese idioms dictionary] (Shanghai: Chengyu da cidian chubanshe, 1996), 564.)

¹⁶ Translator's note: *yiren* 藝人 (master): In this article, the term refers to the great masters of art, rather than the actors, performers, and entertainers as it is understood today.

such as Xu Xi,¹⁷ Huang Quan,¹⁸ Yi Yuanji¹⁹ and Qian Shunju,²⁰ in addition to Ren Bonian,²¹ who brought new life to the art scene with his extraordinarily exceptional skills. I hope not to see the inanimate and lifeless *art conventione*²² dominated by the Four Wangs (*si wang* 四王),²³ and the layman (*wai hang ren* 外行人)²⁴ Wu Changshuo²⁵ who dominates the realm of art. Gradually declining and diminishing (*shiwei shiwei* 式微式微),²⁶ fine art has already deteriorated to an extreme degree. I hope Chinese art will take a bright and glorious path once again and that our ancestors' non-utilitarian stance will be prominently showcased. (This is a characteristic of Chinese fine art. Fine art is commonly supposed to be non-utilitarian, however, in other countries there have always been art practitioners pursuing their interests and seeking fame; quite to the contrary, Chinese artists tended to portray flowers and birds, mountains and rivers so as to express emotions and deepen our aesthetics.) There is no place for art dealers to defraud others on this path either. (This is somewhat over thought, but it is actually inevitable.) Mister Zhimo, your ongoing thoughtfulness is much appreciated. Although one hundred flowers can blossom it is hard to imagine them blossoming all at the same time, (that is to say,) it is impossible to simultaneously share all of the works of art and viewpoints with the audience. As I am not enthusiastic lately, I will not attend the exhibition—yet I mean no harm.

¹⁷ Translator's note: *Xu Xi* 徐熙 (886-975): Xu Xi was a Chinese painter in the Southern Tang kingdom during the Five Dynasties. He was particularly adept at painting birds and flowers. (See: Peng De 彭德, *Zhongguo meishu shi* 中國美術史 [Chinese art history] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2004), 506.)

¹⁸ Translator's note: *Huang Quan* 黃筌 (?-965): Huang Quan, *zi* Yaoshu, was a Chinese painter during the Five Dynasties period and the Song dynasty. He was a master of painting birds and flowers. (See: Xu Shucheng 徐書城, *Songdai huihua shi* 宋代繪畫史 [Art history of the Song dynasty] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2000), 7.)

¹⁹ Translator's note: *Yi Yuanji* 易元吉: Yi Yuanji, *zi* Qingzhi, was a painter during the Northern Song dynasty. He specialized in realistic paintings of animals, especially the gibbons. (See: Hu Wenhui 胡文虎, *Zhongguo gudai huajia cidian* 中國古代畫家辭典 [Dictionary of artists in ancient China] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1999), 56.)

²⁰ Translator's note: *Qian Shunju* 錢舜舉: Qian Shunju was also known as Qian Xuan (錢選). He was a Chinese painter during the late Song dynasty and early Yuan dynasty. He was adept at painting birds and flowers, as well as landscape paintings. (See: Xia Xianchun 夏鹹淳, Gao Yudi 皋玉蒂, *Ming qing sanwen shang qi* 明清散文賞奇 [Proses in Ming and Qing dynasties] (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 2001), 13.)

²¹ Translator's note: *Ren Bonian* 任伯年 (1840-1896): Ren Bonian, also known as Ren Yi, was an outstanding painter in modern China. He excelled at painting landscapes, flowers, birds, and characters. (See: Huang Ding 黃鼎, *Mingjia shuhua jiating de lilun yu shijian* 名家書畫鑒定的理論與實踐 [Theory and practice of the identification on masters' calligraphy and paintings] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2000), 110.)

²² Translator's note: *Art Conventione* (Conventional Art): Conventional Art is made with standard mediums, such as paint and canvas.

²³ Translator's note: *Si Wang* 四王 (Four Wangs): The Four Wangs were four Chinese landscape painters during Qing dynasty, all of which were surnamed Wang. They were Wang Shimin (王時敏), Wang Jian (王鑒), Wang Hui (王翬) and Wang Yuanqi (王原祁). (See: *Jianming zhongguohua cidian* 簡明中國畫辭典 [Brief Chinese painting dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2004), 72.)

²⁴ Translator's note: *Waihang* 外行 (layman): Wu Changshuo said he was best at seal engraving, then at calligraphy and portraying flowers. However, he was a layman at depicting landscapes. (See: Liu Haisu 劉海粟, *Huiyi Wu chang shuo* 回憶吳昌碩 [A Memory of Wu Changshuo] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1986), 35.)

²⁵ Translator's note: *Wu Changshuo* 吳昌碩 (1844-1927): Wu Changlao, also known as Wu Changshuo, was a *Guohua* painter, calligrapher, poet and seal engraver. (See: Sullivan, Michael. *Modern Chinese artists: a biographical dictionary*/Michael Sullivan. University of California Press, 2006), 174.)

²⁶ Translator's note: “式微式微” is a quote from *The Book of Songs* (詩經).

足下之明當察及也。昨歸作文一篇，謹呈。教采登與否，原所弗計。但苟登去，須校對精確，毋白字連篇。

You are so intelligent that you must have perceived it. I deliver the article I drafted yesterday for your review. Whether you publish it or not depends on you, but do not judge it by its author. If it is to be published, it shall be proofread thoroughly to avoid typos throughout.

拜禱此致日祉 悲鴻啟

A tender adieu with appreciation and warm regards,

Xu Beihong

此次佈置妥當，殊見匠心。其佩諸公賢勞，出口亦多佳作。劍父諸幅能置中間（即過去幾幅）亦尊重名家之意。尊意如何？

The exhibition is well-organized and of singular originality. Your hard work is admirable. Most exhibits are masterpieces. It will show your respect for the great masters if you place Gao Jianfu's paintings in the middle.²⁷ May I ask for your honoured response?

²⁷ Translator's note: *Gao Jianfu* 高劍父 (1879-1951): Gao Jianfu, also known as Gao Lun, was a Cantonese artist and the founder of Lingnan School. He was a leader in the movement to modernize traditional Chinese painting as a "new national art" by introducing Western techniques such as realistic drawing and shading. (See: Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artist: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 41.)