

Contemporary Chinese Fine Art  
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Realism From ChinaC

A Search for the Universal Image in 19<sup>th</sup> Century European and Russian Art

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The phenomenon of realism in art had its inception in tumultuous nineteenth-century Europe. In 1848, social insurrection was widespread on the continent. The difficulties of industrialization had been unforeseen—the new habitat provided luxury for a few, comfort for some, but misery for all too many. This disparity led to class struggle. Though it never really gained enough in strength to be called a “revolution” or to be successful, the “Revolution of 1848” had far-reaching, unintended consequences. After 1848, there was a new toughness of mind and an insistence on viewing things as they were rather than as they ought to be. More and more people were seeking insights into the true meaning of man and society. In literature and the arts, this new attitude was called “realism.” Realism was conceived as an art form with a social consciousness, characterized by the search for a universal language, one that would express the suffering and triumphs of the common man. Like nineteenth-century France, mid-twentieth-century China has experienced a period of revolution, reformation, and industrialization from which pictorial art could not remain impregnable.

Gustave Courbet, leader and artistic embodiment of the realist movement, after failing to have his paintings accepted for the Universal Exposition of 1855, constructed an academy annex on the avenue Montaigne in Paris, where he retaliated with a one-man show that competed with the official international exhibition.

Courbet's Realist Manifesto served as the introduction to the exhibition catalogue. It was reminiscent of the political manifestoes of this stormy period, both in its aggressive tone and its concise setting forth of a program. It seems appropriate on the occasion of this groundbreaking exhibition *Realism from China* to recall Courbet's words:

The title of Realist was thrust upon me just as the title of Romantic was imposed upon the men of 1830. Titles have never given a true idea of things: if it were otherwise, the works would be unnecessary... I have studied, outside of any system and without prejudice, the art of the ancients and the art of the moderns. I no more wanted to imitate the one than to copy the other; nor, furthermore, was it my intention to attain the trivial goal of *art for art's sake*. No! I simply wanted to draw forth from a complete acquaintance with tradition the reasoned and independent consciousness of my own individuality.

To know in order to be able to create, that was my idea. To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my epoch, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; in short, to create living art – this is my goal.

The manifesto raises some interesting points on the fundamental nature of realism—for example, Courbet's own dissatisfaction with the name "realism." Champfleury, who similarly protested this vague appellation, was well-known as a pre-Marxian socialist and probably would not have been surprised to see the far-reaching influence of French realism upon Russian and Chinese art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More likely, he would have accepted easily the inevitable alliance between realism and socialism, two significant forces promoting the elevation of the common man.

Realism remains the least studied of all the artistic movements in nineteenth-century France. Only during the past twenty years has there been a resurgence of interest in this enigmatic movement, which shaped the course of Western modern art and served as the impetus for a universal movement away from stale academism toward an art that provided intelligible imagery and meaningful content, thoroughly accessible to all strata of society. The paintings of realism from China are therefore of extreme value. They are evidence of an enduring realist tradition, proof that despite the ironies and inconsistencies in the history of realism there is a collective, universal image that continues to serve society regardless of national, ethnic, or chronological boundaries.

Perhaps realism can most fairly be described as a confluence of all previously named aesthetics under the banner "art for social change." Here begins the answer to the persistent question, "What distinguishes *realism* from the *genre*-style paintings of the academy tradition?" Thematically they were identical. Realistic painting had been seen before in the history of art—Bruegel (1520?-1569), Vermeer (1632-1675),

Velázquez (1599-1660), the Le Nain brothers (1593-1678), Chardin (1699-1779), and Hogarth (1679-1764) had already shared the feeling for beauty hidden in the commonplace. What was considered the innovation of the realist artist of the mid-nineteenth century and after?

The realist pursued the quotidian subject matter to uncover some pertinent truth about society, whereas the genre painter typically depicted domestic genre scenes that were genteel, safe, narrative, or allegorical (in other words, subject matter that adhered to academy principles, skirting the truly disturbing issue of the time). The turgid neoclassical and romantic emblems were met with disdain by the realists, who immortalized common laborers at work and at home. The realists accused the neoclassicists and romantics of evading truth, of running from the burgeoning realities of their time, emphasizing feeling and imagination, choosing “poetic” truth over “real” truth. The realists vowed to issue art with a contemporary relevance that would touch the largest number of viewers.

Courbet was the first to break from the academy and the first to be hailed as a socialist painter by his contemporary critics. Despite Courbet’s recognition of the ancients he, in fact, propelled the avant-garde movement by altering the presentation of subject matter and bringing it right up to the surface of the canvas. Spatial dictates, dominant since the Renaissance, were abandoned. The new spaces of the modern era, beginning with the realists, were more subjective or distorted by the artists’ nonperception of reality.

Yet there was still a certain ambiguity between innovation and tradition in the art of the nineteenth century. Courbet forcefully rejected the sterile academic formulas of his day while asserting that thorough knowledge of the art of the past was necessary for creating new art. Contradictions such as this are inherent in all movements of artistic renewal, especially realism. So it does little good to delineate realism from academism or Russian romantic realism from Chinese socialist realism, for the relationship between avant-garde realism and the traditional academy style is a symbiotic one, giving way to many variant realist styles.

France, Russia, and China have each struggled to emerge from the throes of revolution and the rapid changes of industrialization; realism was a movement with broad popular appeal, and its implementation solidified the operations, customs, and traditions of the people, reestablishing a common national bond.

Almost contemporaneous with the French, the Russians took great strides into the modern era with a realist art movement of their own. The foundations for this

new movement were laid by a group of artists known as the *peredvizhniki* or Wanderers. In 1863, two years after the emancipation of the serfs, the original leaders of the movement (Kramskoi, Ge, Perov, Antolkolsky, and nine others) seceded from the Petersburg Academy of Art, rejecting “art for art’s sake.”

The Petersburg Academy had controlled completely all artistic enterprise in Russia since the founding of the institution in 1754 by Catherine the Great (it had been modeled on the academic system originally conceived by Plato in the fourth century B.C.). Until the era of the Wanderers, the absolutism of the academy had remained unchallenged. An artist’s survival depended on his or her secure place within the academy’s walls; secession from the academy would mean an end to official commissions and was, therefore, economic suicide. But the Wanderers, determined to bring art to the people, set up traveling exhibitions throughout the countryside, implementing their ideals of making art “useful” to society. A second group of rebels, including the artists Repin, Polenov, Savitskii, and Jaroshenko, joined the Wanderers between 1872 and 1878.

Kramskoi had articulated one of the goals of the Wanderers as “independence from administrative guardianship so that the artist could concentrate on higher obligations.” This goal might never have been realized if members of the group had not met Savva and Elizabeth Mamontov, wealthy railway industrialists, who became their friends and financiers. In 1870, Savva Mamontov bought an estate—Abramtsevo—that accommodated the artists, their families, and some friends involved in the movement. Abramtsevo was an artists’ colony of mutual education, a progressive settlement of intense creativity and searching not limited to the visual arts. At the estate, Kramskoi would introduce recently published notes on aesthetics and social philosophy to his colleagues, and composers Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, and Borodin as well as writers Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Turgenev would exchange ideas. The common goal was to produce works of art based on long-neglected national artistic traditions.

French writer Pierre Proudhon and Russian writer/aesthetic propagandist Nikolai Chernyshevskii inspired Kramskoi to promulgate realist doctrines like Courbet’s initial manifesto; in his doctrines, Kramskoi adamantly refused the standards of beauty imposed on students of the academy system, on the grounds that they had no basis in real life. Kramskoi, Perov, Repin, Jaroshenko, and Ge made radical changes in portraiture, transmuting it into a programmatic genre, a specific platform for advocating the contemporary hero. Landscape, too, responded to the

demands of the reforming society: Mother Russia, in her most mundane manifestations, became the dominant theme in the Wanderers' art and the most discernible element of Russian realist painting that was passed on to the Chinese. Geographically both Russia and China are tremendous land masses populated by dozens of ethnic cultures; although each was unified physically, the two governments needed the assistance of the visual arts, music and literature to generate a unifying national spirit as well.

Russian realism is not distinguished from the contemporary realism of the West by its formal technical perfection, but by its outlook on the world and its particular quest for a universal significance of imagery. One basic concept of European realism—that paintings be strictly objective—was alien to the Russian concept of realism. Russian genre paintings were compositions attuned to detail and narrative, perhaps because of the strong influence of literature on the Russian consciousness. In comparing Millet's *The Gleaners* with Perov's *The Peasant's Funeral*, the French artist has greater plasticity of form and a powerful rhythm of labor, while the Russian artist expresses the acuteness of grief with a sobering poetry that is particularly Russian. The Chinese possess a similar predilection for the poetic, but the most important function of Chinese art has been its integral role in forming an ordered society.

Zhang Yen Yuan, a Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.C.) historian and critic, gives the most interesting account of the development, methods, and aims of painting in China. In the first chapter of his *Origins of Painting*, he wrote,

Painting promotes culture and strengthens the principles of right conduct. It penetrates completely all the aspects of the universal spirit. It fathoms the subtle and the abstruse, serving thus the same purpose as the six classics, and it revolves with the four seasons. It originated from nature and not from any decrees or works of men.

China is a profoundly traditional culture. What Zhang Yen Yuan succinctly described as the purpose of painting is not only apt today, but also not far from Mao Ze Dong's expectations of art for the new China.

Traditional Chinese painting is executed with a soft brush, and ink and/or color, an extremely subtle idiom. The Chinese artists transpose their familiarity with distinctive brushwork into the Western genre with individuality. In any literature on Chinese painting, there is reference to a *tao*, or way. The aim in Chinese painting has been to express *tao* as a basic belief in an order and harmony of nature. The

contemporary realist paintings in the exhibition continue the realist tradition, but at the same time extend from their own revered Chinese aesthetic heritage.

Despite the fact that realism can be used as the handmaiden of social reform, it is malleable and has just as frequently been put to the service of preserving the status quo. In France, Napoleon III used the realists to help him subvert radicalism and glorify his position as self-proclaimed emperor. In China, realism was accepted and immediately put to work for the revolutionary cause, in the service of the central authority.

Mao Ze Dong held the Yenan Forum on literature and art in May 1943 to instruct the masses in how the arts needed to serve the revolution. On the questions of literature and art, he defined a struggle on two fronts: proletarian literature and art needed to be oriented toward the broad masses of people, particularly the writers, peasants, and soldiers; and workers and artists needed to take a stand for and serve the broad masses of people. Mao, himself an accomplished poet, considered art as subordinate to politics but also sought a harmonious merging of correct political stance and high artistic quality. He opposed works of art with a “wrong” political viewpoint as well as works in the “poster and slogan” style (which were “correct” in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power).

To popularize art for the masses while maintaining a high artistic standard is indeed a struggle; one could easily argue that this goal was not realized, that the standard was compromised to the advantage of mass production of paintings. Jin Gao's own training at the Beijing Central Fine Arts Academy was hastened as part of the movement to graduate as many artists as quickly as possible and to put them to work painting to serve the people and the party. By 1960, the cultural commissar Chou Yang was, in his report to the third congress, urging the integration of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. Chou probably had the revolutionary paintings of David, Delacroix, or Géricault in mind; he felt that paintings should depict ideal, heroic characters representing the progressive forces in society.

. China was developing rapidly, its difficulties compounded by the overwhelming size of the country and its population. The changes were reflected in the art academy curriculum, which in turn becomes a case study for the development of the realist style in China.