

Painter needs peace for quiet art

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Ink painter Li Huayi's landscape paintings appear to be a mix of traditional Chinese style and Western modernism, much like the Suzhou Museum, where the Shanghai native's solo show opened in late September.

The museum in the eastern city was designed by acclaimed Chinese-American architect IM Pei, and fuses elements from East and West.

On display until Dec 17 are 18 large landscape paintings — many several meters long — that Li has produced over the past decade. The exhibition, titled *Fantasies on Paper and Enchantments in Gold*, includes many of the artist's iconic landscapes on paper and more recent works using gilded screens as a medium.

The San Francisco-based artist's works are widely collected by such Western institutions as the British Museum, Harvard Art Museums and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Many of his paintings have fetched hundreds of thousands of dollars at international auctions in recent years.

Li is regarded as ranking among a handful of influential artists whose ink paintings resemble those of the masters of the Song dynasty (960-1279). Landscapes by artists from this era have long been regarded as the best of their kind in Chinese art history.

Chen Ruijin, director of the Suzhou Museum, said the high mountains, ancient trees, rugged crags and cliffs found in Li's works often remind viewers of art from this period when they first look. Yet, on closer inspection, Chen said, Li's technique of combining elements from modern Western art with traditional Chinese ink painting is soon revealed.

Li, who was born in 1948 to a rich family in Shanghai, started to learn ink painting at the age of 6 under Wang Jimei, son of one of Shanghai's most renowned traditional painters, Wang Zhen. Ten years later, he began to study Western art with Zhang Chongren, a graduate of the Belgian Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

In 1982, Li moved to San Francisco in the United States and later obtained his art degree from the Academy of Arts before settling down in the coastal city.

"It was very easy for me to appreciate the Chinese masters' ink paintings collected by museums in the US. I often visited their art exhibitions in order to see these paintings," Li said.

With his knowledge of Eastern and Western art, Li compares Chinese ink painting to Western abstract expressionist art. Both aim to express the artists' sentiments via the depiction of landscapes.

Li's paintings mainly focus on the subjects of mountains, trees, waterfalls and mist, which are reinterpreted by the artist after countless visits to mountain ranges around China and abroad.

Before the recent opening of his solo show, Li visited the world's highest peak, Qomolangma, known as Mount Everest in the West. The 69-year-old said he was not strong enough to climb to the summit, but he tried to see as much as possible during his stay in its foothills. As with other

Li Huayi's detailed depictions of iconic landscapes recall the masters of the Song Dynasty



Ink painter Li Huayi and some of his work. Li's landscape paintings appear to be a mix of traditional Chinese style and Western modernism. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



mountains he has visited, the artist said he enjoys the process of climbing and absorbing picturesque landscapes.

His favorite peak, Huangshan Mountain in East China's Anhui province, draws tourists from around China and the rest of the world and is famous for its attractive trees.

"Huangshan Mountain is like a work by a designer. There are no weeds on the rocks and the pine trees have a very unique look," Li said.

That is how the artist unveils his reimagined landscapes on his paper and gilded screens — crooked trees clinging to rugged cliffs.

Catherine Kwai, founder of the Kwai Fung Hin Art Gallery, which is presenting Li's solo show, said Li usually embarks on a trip to the mountains after finishing a work. An old friend of Li, Kwai joked that he is too slow at painting because he has completed no more than 400 works over the past 60 years.

"He is very meticulous in his painting. It's incredible to see the detail he puts into each leaf, even when the scroll is several meters long," said Kwai.

Li said his painting process is more like an exercise in practice, where the act of repetition allows him to fuse his own sentiments into each stage through his brush strokes.

Several years ago, Li set up a studio in Beijing, far from his base in San Francisco. His work space is downtown, near the landmark China Central Television Tower.

"Many friends say that, although Beijing lies beyond my studio's curtains, inside is totally my quiet space," Li said.

He prefers solitude when working in the city and enjoys the peacefulness of the painting process. He seldom attends parties and typically enjoys his own company.

This is reflected in his works, which contain no trace of human beings or their impact on the landscape. Li's protagonists are trees, stones and water. The artist joked that this is because he needs peace to work — and people are always noisy.

"Ink painting is a quiet art form, like the moon, while Western art is strong and vigorous, like the sun," Li said.