Liu Kang

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The Definition of an Intellectual

An essay in *Time* magazine once stated, “A doctoral degree is no longer considered sufficient to qualify one as an intellectual. Even a university professor is not necessarily an intellectual. A scientist is considered an intellectual only if he meets certain criteria.”

The publication’s definition of intelligentsia was based on two hypotheses:

1. An intellectual cannot merely be a scholar — his soul must also possess an independent spirit and creative ability. He has to pursue a perspective for the sake of pursuing it. As Richard Hofstadter says, “An intellectual lives for the pursuit of a perspective.” And, in the words of Christopher Lasch, “An intellectual’s life is about thinking.”

2. An intellectual must be critical of society and its prevailing values, as was Socrates.

No matter how much education a person has received, as long as he is not sceptical and critical of fashionable views, prevailing customs and casually adopted values, he is nothing but a “living bookshelf.” An academic who goes with the crowd does not have a soul.

I think we may borrow these remarks to make a stand for artists.

If an artist who has spent his entire life painting does not have a pure and virtuous heart or the ability and energy to create, he is only a craftsman. He who fears to challenge convention and who holds on to the dregs of tradition is a homunculus, not a real human being.

Our society’s lack of depth is perhaps due to its heavy emphasis on economics. At the same time, our history is short, and the cultural cultivation of our people is substantially lacking. We have many good painters, but discerning and deep-thinking artists are rare. Despite the many good essays published, we have yet to see a serious and discerning critic. Many exhibitions have taken place, but very few artworks are really worth viewing. Ink painters show a lack of foundation in calligraphy, while oil painters are unable to produce stable and realistic sketches. It would be dreadful if this situation persists!

ENDNOTES

1. This translation is meant to correspond with the Chinese idiom which Liu Kang used, 对牛弹琴.
2. While there is a van Honthorst work titled *The Concert*, it does not tally with the description that Liu Kang has given here. Liu Kang may have been referring to a lesser known work by van Honthorst.
3. The precise work that Liu Kang refers to here as *Chorus* could not be established at the time of print. *Chorus* is a translation of the title he gave, 《合唱》.
4. The official title of the work could not be established at the time of print. Liu Kang refers to it as 《星期目的乐队》, which translates as the band on Sunday.
5. Borodin graduated as a doctor but worked as a chemist.
6. The precise Raphael work that Liu Kang refers to here could not be established at the time of print.
It is true that culture and art require long-term cultivation and cannot be hastened. Any academic organisation that is 20 years old should calmly and seriously reflect on the past and prepare for the future. The 20th anniversary is nothing more than just a celebration.

*This article was written as a foreword to the Singapore Art Society's 20th Anniversary art publication.*

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**Liu Haisu and Contemporary Chinese Art**

I was 16 when I enrolled in the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校), the oldest and largest art institution in China, and studied under Mr Liu Haisu, the principal. My first impression of him: a large head, wide mouth, sonorous voice, sharp eyes, and a face that expresses resolute determination. He was well-built but not massive; he walked slowly but with vigour, and with a solemn and steady poise.

Although he did not conduct our classes, Teacher Haisu set aside one or two evenings each week to lecture on art. His scope was very wide: artistic ideas, autobiographical accounts of artists, the Six Principles of Chinese painting (六法论) by Xie He (谢赫), the Impressionists’ analysis of light, his personal experiences in painting, the objectives of setting up an art academy, and so forth. His lectures were serious yet fun, and the students listened with relish. When he was in the mood, he could talk for two to three hours without showing signs of fatigue. However, there were days when he dismissed the class even though it was not yet time for his lecture to conclude, as if he had urgent matters to attend to.

In 1928, Chen Jen Hao (陈人浩) and I went to France for further studies. Teacher Haisu went on a government art study trip to Europe, and we spent most of our time together. We visited fine art museums and studied the masterpieces of past generations of artists, toured famous art galleries to admire recent works by contemporary artists, and gained much from this initiation. It was during this time that I became acquainted with Fu Lei (傅雷) who was studying literature in France and who later became a translator. Owing to our similar temperaments, we became close friends and he subsequently joined us to form a small travelling group. Hence, we expanded the scope of our activities and visited the leaders of the art world, such as the principal of École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, sculptor Paul Landowski (sculptor of the bust of Sun Yat Sen (孙中山)), and artist Kees van Dongen, among others. We also visited the residence of Jean-François Millet and a museum dedicated to Claude Monet. The most memorable was a visit to a place of residence which had at one time housed the studios of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne and a few other Impressionist artists. Many outstanding works were still hanging on its walls, left behind by the artists as souvenirs. We also went to van Gogh’s grave to pay our respects. These are the utmost desires of every artist.