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Headline: Seeking to merge the East with the West

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By **SUSIE WONG**

XU Beihong (1895-1953), from China, was a modern artist.

The paintings at this exhibition span the 1920s to the 1940s, an era in which modern art had already taken root in the West. With Xu's trips to Europe, first in 1919 to study art in Paris and second, to witness successful exhibitions of his works, he was likely to have been exposed to the current "isms" of the time, familiar with the work of Matisse, for example, and certainly with the academic tenor of realism, which influenced the social realism character of his work.

Kwok Kian Chow, director of SAM, says in his foreword to the catalogue: "Xu Beihong is one of the first names to be mentioned when we consider the topic of realism in Asian modern art." And Chow Yian Ping, co-curator, describes Xu's work as "looking for a way to merge the East with the West, and to arrive at a modern Asian artistic language".

What constitutes modern? Perhaps, the application of the description "modern" here entails the practice of introducing Western visual language, and, in Xu's case, a fixed-point perspective along with a naturalism or realism into his work which was otherwise inherently Chinese. The Chinese character of his work is not owed to the approach of traditional ink-work on rice paper alone (Xu also painted a number of oils) but is also a result of the content, based on tales, anecdotes and symbolism of the Chinese genre – that is, rooted in Chinese literariness or culture.

There are two reasons why Xu Beihong looked West. One is beauty: "He who resonates with nature may attempt to simulate it and thereby tend towards beauty." The other is "the concern for social reality and people". The first is evidenced by Xu's studies of the human figure; his sketches show people more naturalistic, anatomically more proportionate. Such drawings, seen to accompany the main work, were incorporated into final paintings like the *Foolish Old Man who Removed the Mountains* (1940).

On the second reason, co-curator Chow writes: "On the one hand, with the gradual introduction of Western art into China, Chinese intellectuals started to regard the formal characteristics of Western art forms from a cultural ideological perspective, connecting them to the economic, political, social and cultural achievements of the West. On the other hand, the formal characteristics of China's stagnant traditional literati



Social realism: Xu Beihong's 'Put Down Your Whip'. The paintings at the show here span the 1920s to the 1940s

painting were associated with the country's poor living standards and backward feudalistic society."

However, rather than explicating the "modern" character of Xu's works, the exhibition stops at just being a documentary account of his sojourn in Nanyang as evidenced through photos, letters, fans, and drawings at the exhibition.

It traces the artist's connections with Nanyang, with places in South and South-east Asia, that Xu had journeyed through, and stopped over, during his various passages to Europe. He did, after all, reside for at least five years (around 1937 to 1941) in a region that spanned India, Malaya and Singapore, and passed through Singapore as many as seven times.

The letters to friends, portraits of acquaintances and paintings with inscriptions are personal reflections, warm encouragements and patriotic exhortations. There are also luminaries he met, drew or painted, such as poet, author and visual artist Rabindranath Tagore and the Father of India, Mahatma Gandhi.

Xu Beihong in Nanyang is a personable account of the artist's life and career.

Xu Beihong in Nanyang, Singapore Art Museum, April 5 to July 13