



# ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol. 3, No. 2 (Total Issue No. 10) Apr.-Jun., 2025

## Li Shutong and the Dual Legacy of Impressionist Oil Painting

Fu Chunxiao

**To cite this article:** Fu Chunxiao, “Li Shutong and the Dual Legacy of Impressionist Oil Painting,” *Art Frontier* 3, no.2 (June 2025): 116-125, <https://doi.org/10.64212/AMJL2909>.

**DOI:** 10.64212/AMJL2909

**ISSN:** 2835-5490

**EISSN:** 2836-841X

© 2025 Frontier Press.

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

**Website:** [www.artfrontier.org](http://www.artfrontier.org)

**Email:** [artfrontier2023@outlook.com](mailto:artfrontier2023@outlook.com)

**Publishing Frequency:** Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



# Li Shutong and the Dual Legacy of Impressionist Oil Painting

---

Fu Chunxiao

## Abstract

This paper examines Li Shutong, an early Chinese art educator in Japan, who systematically learned Impressionist oil painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Upon returning to China, he localized and transformed the art form through creative practice and education, integrating his sketching-light and color-atmosphere pedagogical system into art education and driving a paradigm shift in modern Chinese art pedagogy. Adopting the approach of “Western techniques as the means, Chinese intent as the essence,” he fused Eastern subjects with Impressionist language in his creative practice. He elevated art to the realm of aesthetic education and spiritual cultivation, accomplishing a cultural translation from technique to belief. Thus, he became a dual transmitter of Impressionism’s eastward progression.

## Key Words

Impressionism, art education, east-west integration, dual heritage

## 1. Introduction

Li Shutong (1880–1942), courtesy name Shutong and art name Hongyi, stands as a multifaceted figure in modern Chinese cultural history. He was among the earliest introducers of Western painting in China, pioneered modern music education, and attained venerated status as a revered monk of the Buddhist Vinaya School in his later years. In the field of art history, Li Shutong served as a bridge connecting the spirit of traditional literati painting with modern visual language. His development in Impressionist study, educational philosophy, and artistic beliefs reflected modern China’s cultural choices and self-positioning amid the eastward transmission of Western learning.

Unlike contemporaries such as Xu Beihong, who leaned more toward an academic realist approach, Li Shutong studied at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (TSFA) in Japan during his early years. His artistic education was profoundly influenced by French Impressionist oil painting, and he developed a visual framework centered on the trinity of sketching from life, light and color, and atmosphere. He not only internalized Impressionist

techniques in his personal work but, more significantly, transformed its aesthetic principles into a pedagogical paradigm within China’s native art education system, profoundly shaping the development of early Chinese art education.

Impressionist painting was introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century, rapidly became one of the components of Japan’s Western-style painting education system, and gave rise to a group of Impressionist painters represented by Kuroda Seiki and Kume Keichiro. During the Meiji Restoration, Japan adopted a cultural translation strategy of technical absorption and spiritual localization toward Western art forms, a strategy that profoundly influenced Chinese painters studying in Japan.

Li Shutong completed his artistic training within this cultural context of Impressionist adaptation in Japan. Directly influenced by Japanese Impressionist practice, he later introduced the concept of “form as vessel, culture as spirit” into China through his teaching upon returning home. Thus, Impressionism represents not merely a painting style but a manifestation of visual modernity. Its reception history in East Asia reflects

not only the renewal of artistic vocabulary but also the reconstruction of cultural identity and value systems.

As an intermediary figure in the eastward transmission of Impressionist oil painting, Li Shutong holds unique research value as a transitional figure. Well-versed in traditional Chinese literati art while systematically studying Western modern art, his artistic evolution was not a linear process of substitution but a result of fusion, translation, and reinvention. This intermediary role makes him a representative case for examining Chinese art's transition from tradition to modernity.

Current research on the modern transformation of Chinese art predominantly focuses on Xu Beihong's realism and Lin Fengmian's East-West fusion as overarching pathways, while studies on Li Shutong as a representative figure of the inward and educational transformation of the Impressionist spirit have lagged behind. Therefore, an in-depth examination of how Li Shutong advanced the localization of Impressionism through his personal artistic journey not only enriches the comprehensiveness of art-historical writing but also deepens the structural understanding of Chinese artistic modernity.

Since the 1980s, research on Li Shutong has gradually developed, although it is unevenly distributed across disciplines. Most studies concentrate on his Buddhist philosophy, achievements in music education, and the construction of his public and moral persona. Research on his painting and art education tends toward biographical descriptions, with insufficient systematic image analysis and technical methodology.

A few scholars have suggested that Li Shutong embodied a dual response to modernity and national identity in the art realm but such perspectives largely remain confined to aesthetic commentary, failing to delve deeply into the mechanisms of his reception of Impressionism and the pedagogical logic behind its translation into education. Furthermore, existing research often overlooks the practical dimension of his role as an educator, lacking a longitudinal comparative analysis of his teaching system within the broader history of Chinese art education.

Research on art students studying in Japan during the late Qing and early Republican periods is relatively abundant, with academia exploring it from multiple dimensions such as dissemination pathways and educational influence. In examining the systematic transmission of Impressionism as adapted in Japan, Pan Yaochang explicitly states in *History of Modern and Contemporary Art Education in China*<sup>1</sup> that the Japanese art education system during the Meiji period had already

established a mature model for localizing Western art—with the TSFA as its core institution. This system preserved the foundational training framework of French academic art while integrating Impressionist color theory with the flat aesthetic of Japanese painting. This translated technical system was transmitted to China through students such as Li Shutong and Zeng Yannian who studied in Japan. During his time at the TSFA in 1905, Li Shutong studied Impressionist oil painting under Kuroda. His practice piece *Camellia* exemplifies the fusion of Impressionist light-and-color techniques with Eastern subjects; such technical practices further spread through his art teaching at Shanghai's Soochow University.

Individual studies on Li Shutong as a first-generation Japanese-trained art scholar remain fragmented. Particularly lacking is a systematic interpretation of how he constructed his artistic thought system under the influence of Impressionist teachers like Kuroda, lacking systematic interpretation based on archival documents, visual materials, and teaching notes. The loss of his works and scarcity of materials after his monastic ordination have also constrained research progress.

Current research on the deep-level translation mechanisms between Impressionism and Chinese cultural structures remains underdeveloped, with significant room for exploration in areas such as teaching methodologies, aesthetic education systems, and religious sensibility. Li Shutong's case study offers a valuable sample for examining this cultural grafting of the Impressionist spirit, warranting in-depth investigation as a breakthrough point.

This paper centers on Li Shutong's reception and transformation of Impressionism, exploring three key threads: his oil paintings, teaching practices, and artistic concepts. It seeks to reconstruct the interactive logic between his localized practice of Impressionism and its embeddedness within the educational system. It aims to bridge the gap between individual art history and the history of educational institutions, revealing how Li Shutong, as a transitional figure, achieved a profound translation of Impressionist oil painting within the Chinese context. This offers a new analytical framework and intellectual resources for understanding the structure of modernity in Chinese modern and contemporary art.

## 2. Li Shutong's Artistic Enlightenment and Early Educational Background

### 2.1 Artistic Enlightenment in Tianjin and Shanghai

Li Shutong was born into a prosperous salt Li Shutong

was born into a prosperous salt merchant family in Tianjin. The Li household not only enjoyed economic affluence but also cultivated a deep appreciation for culture and the arts, laying a profound foundation for his future artistic achievements and aesthetic sensibilities. His father excelled in calligraphy and frequently associated with literati and scholars. The family possessed an extensive library, immersing young Li Shutong in this refined cultural environment from childhood. According to Chen Xing's *Li Shutong: An Extended Chronology of Master Hongyi*,<sup>2</sup> Li Shutong demonstrated a keen interest in calligraphy and painting from an early age. By the age of eleven he had begun copying seal script texts, and by thirteen he was already deeply engaged in studying seal script classics such as *Xuan Wang Hunting Stele*. He also studied music and opera. In 1897, he acquired a German piano and systematically studied Western music using the Beyer and Czerny methods. Simultaneously, he actively participated in amateur opera circles in Tianjin, reflecting the diverse artistic foundation he built from childhood.

After his father's death in 1889, the family's fortunes declined. Li Shutong accompanied his mother south to Shanghai, spending his adolescence in the most culturally vibrant city of the modern era. This was not merely a geographical relocation but an expansion of his cultural horizons. As a cultural hub blending Chinese and Western influences during the late Qing Dynasty, Shanghai hosted numerous experimental activities introducing new educational methods and Western art forms, providing Li Shutong with a unique starting point for engaging with Western art.

During his time in Shanghai, Li Shutong systematically studied traditional calligraphy, Chinese painting, and classical prose. He developed a particular fondness for Tang Dynasty regular script and the literati painting styles of the Song and Yuan dynasties, copying works by masters such as Dong Qichang and Bada Shanren. Through mastering traditional artistic vocabulary—brushwork, composition, and artistic conception—Li cultivated an exceptionally solid technical foundation and an acute aesthetic sensitivity.

In his painting studies, he emphasized not only form but also spirit and essence. This focus became an intrinsic point of resonance when he later absorbed Impressionism's emphasis on atmosphere and light sensitivity. Li Shutong's early understanding of the spirit of *xieyi* (freehand expression) enabled him to engage with Western realism and light-and-shadow techniques, not through blind imitation but with the ability to reinterpret them through the lens of his native artistic

sensibilities.

The late nineteenth century saw a surge of pictorial publications in Shanghai, with imported illustrated magazines that exerted a profound influence on Li Shutong. Through these publications, he systematically encountered Western oil painting, sculpture, architecture, and craft design, recognizing their fundamental differences from Chinese painting. By 1900, he frequently read newspaper reports on Western painting exhibitions and art trends, attempting to copy Western-style images himself. Though technically rudimentary, this imitative learning period laid the groundwork for his perceptual sensitivity to the pictorial language of Impressionism.

## 2.2 The Shanghai Literary and Art Society and Early Artistic Group Activities

In March 1912, Li Shutong co-founded the Literary and Art Society (LAS) with Liu Yazhi and others, launching the *Wenmei* magazine to awaken the masses and enlighten public consciousness through literature and art. On May 14, 1912, he presided over the society's inaugural gathering, attended by over twenty members including Liu Yazhi, Huang Binhong, and Zeng Yannian. This society championed artistic revival and individual expression, pioneering the integration of fine arts into China's early discourse on social and cultural reform. Its motto,<sup>3</sup> "Art and Literature Unite to Enlighten the People," reflected an openness to Western art while laying the ideological groundwork for later East-West fusion art theories. Li Shutong advocated that "sketching from life should be the foremost task of painting," aligning with Impressionism's emphasis on objective visual experience.

Through exchanges between the LAS and progressive journals of the time, Li Shutong gradually encountered the painting philosophies of artists such as Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, and Claude Monet. In his essay "A Comparison of Chinese and Western Painting Techniques," he noted: "Chinese painting emphasizes subjective psychological depiction—the so-called 'freehand brushwork'—in its expressive form, while Western painting seeks objective accuracy of form based on realism."<sup>4</sup>

He copied Western oil paintings and experimented with oil paints in still-life studies, some of which were published in magazines. This experimental creative process laid essential groundwork for his later advanced studies in Japan, where he systematically learned Impressionist oil painting techniques.

Li Shutong's artistic formative years were not a linear transition from tradition to modernity, but rather

a multifaceted absorption rooted in profound traditional cultivation. Whether influenced by the literati culture of Tianjin or the diverse collisions of Shanghai's emerging metropolis, he actively absorbed and critically reflected, forming his early artistic judgment. Particularly noteworthy is how he established an aesthetic affinity with Western painting systems through image dissemination and community engagement. This fostered a modern visual orientation centered on a principle of sketching from life as the foundation and light and color as the essence. This foundation would fully unfold during his subsequent studies in Japan and deep engagement with Impressionist painting. Upon returning to China, he progressively achieved a spiritual translation through his teaching, thereby embodying the dual inheritance characteristic of his artistic philosophy.

### 3. Study in Japan and Deep Engagement with Impressionist Oil Painting

#### 3.1 Study Abroad Context: An Individual Choice Amidst Late Qing Art Trends in Japan

From the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries the Qing government's New Policies opened doors for overseas study, prompting a wave of young scholars to journey eastward to Japan, and marking the first eastward movement of China's modern intellectual class. In the artistic sphere, studying Western painting in Japan became a prevailing trend, attracting figures such as Xu Beihong, Chen Shizeng, and Jiang Zhaohua. Li Shutong's academic journey proved particularly representative. Not only was he among the earliest Chinese students to study Western painting in Japan, but he also served as a key intermediary in introducing Japan's translated version of Impressionism to China.

In 1905, Li Shutong traveled to Japan for his studies. He initially enrolled at the private Kōbun Gakuin in Tokyo before entering the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (TSFA), now Tokyo University of the Arts (TUA), majoring in Western painting. There, he encountered a systematic art education system emphasizing life drawing, light and shadow analysis, and structural sketching—a direct reflection of Japan's absorption and reinterpretation of Western art education during the Meiji period.

Founded by Okakura Kakuzō in 1887, the TSFA was established with the aim of integrating Western realist training with Japan's indigenous artistic spirit. Its Western Painting Department was built upon pedagogical principles pioneered by Italian painter Antonio Fontanesi and French painter Raphaël Collin.

During Li Shutong's enrollment, instructors including Kuroda and Kume were profoundly influenced by French Impressionism, placing particular emphasis on light and shadow, atmospheric perspective, and color harmony.

According to the 1933 archival records of TUA historical records, Li Shutong participated in outdoor sketching sessions led by Kuroda. The curriculum primarily covered chiaroscuro training, color mixing exercises, and compositional organization—core techniques of Impressionist oil painting. Additionally, the school's textbooks referenced art books featuring works by Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and others.

This educational background provided Li Shutong with the theoretical foundation and technical training of Impressionism's principle of expressing light through color, which guided the direction of his later oil paintings.

#### 3.2 The Reception of Impressionism in Japanese Art Circles

Impressionist oil painting entered Japan during the mid-to-late Meiji period. Okakura initiated a fusionism approach, advocating an artistic transformation strategy that sought to embody Eastern spirituality through Western forms. Kuroda, a Western painting instructor who had studied in Paris, was profoundly influenced by Impressionism. Upon his return, his works such as *Lakeside* and *Reading* demonstrated Impressionist techniques—the juxtaposition of light, shadow, and color, along with a heightened awareness of sketching from life. A core Impressionist circle emerged in Japanese art circles centered around Kuroda, emphasizing outdoor sketching, natural color tones, and atmospheric expression. Impressionist concepts were continuously disseminated through exhibition systems and art journals; Li Shutong received his training within this institutional art environment. His learning process involved not only adopting Impressionist techniques but also internalizing the underlying modernity concepts—including an emphasis on individual perception, visual experience, and psychological states.

The TSFA introduced Western textbooks like *La Peinture Moderne* and the *Cours de dessin et de peinture* series, extensively featuring reproductions and technical analyses of works by Monet, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, and others. Students primarily practiced still life and figure drawing, with training focused on color block composition and atmospheric rendering.

More significantly, students at TSFA were encouraged to attend the *Ministry of Education Art Exhibition* and the *Hakuba-kai Exhibition*. Li Shutong recorded in his

diary a keen interest in paintings depicting natural light and attempted to copy works by Kume. A comparative analysis of Kuroda's *Morning Dress* and Renoir's *Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette* illustrated the direct path through which Impressionist influence entered Li Shutong's painting practice.

### 3.3 Analysis of Li Shutong's Artistic Style and Impressionist Characteristics

Works such as *The Little Monk*, *Lady with a Fan*, and *Self-Portrait*, created during Li Shutong's time at the TSFA, are among the more complete oil paintings that have survived to the present day. These works exhibit a strong Impressionist color language and expressive structure. In *The Little Monk*, the use of side lighting and a predominantly cool color palette creates a tranquil atmosphere. The treatment of the figure's face and monk's robe employs overlapping color blocks and softened contours, reminiscent of Monet's approach to rendering water surfaces and clothing textures.

*Self-Portrait* employs a frontal light source with a blurred background. The facial structure reveals subtle gradations within a gray-green palette, reflecting his meticulous grasp of color perspective and skin texture. This concept of an "atmospheric portrait" was evidently influenced by the Impressionist approach found in the self-portraits of Renoir and Manet.

Li Shutong's color treatment emphasizes warm-cool contrasts and subjective palette selection over naturalistic reproduction. He employs light gray tones to render the transition between object volume and background, favoring asymmetrical compositions and open frames—consistent with Impressionism's break from traditional pyramid-shaped structures.

Furthermore, he paid particular attention to the reflections of objects under shifting light and shadow. This visual awareness aligns closely with the Impressionist emphasis on outdoor observation and capturing fleeting impressions. For instance, the rhythmic play of light between the fan surface and the drapery in *Lady with a Fan* bears a strong resemblance to the rhythmic treatment of light and shadow in Degas's series of dancers.

Stylistically, Li Shutong shares striking similarities with Japanese Impressionist artists who localized the movement, such as Kume, Fujishima Takeji, and Wada Eisaku. Particularly, Kume's series *Nude with Still Life* and Li Shutong's *The Little Monk* are nearly identical in composition and treatment of light, warranting side-by-side analysis.

However, unlike Japanese painters who tended to fuse Impressionism with Japanese aesthetics, Li Shutong

primarily employed Impressionist techniques as tools to reinterpret Chinese themes. His subjects predominantly featured Eastern monks and ladies, with compositions often blending symmetrical layouts and tranquil meditative atmospheres. This approach of using Western methods to express Chinese sentiments became the most creative attempt at local adaptation in his artistic practice.

Li Shutong's study in Japan was not only a pivotal period for his technical maturation but also a crucial juncture in his artistic ideology's shift toward modernity. Through training at the TSFA, he systematically mastered Impressionist color theory, compositional methods, and the fundamentals of visual psychology. By participating in Japan's Impressionist localization movement, he not only adopted Western techniques of intuitive expression and light rendering but also internalized them as tools to serve Chinese cultural connotations.

This phase of artistic practice laid the groundwork for his later introduction of Impressionist principles into China's art education system, his advocacy for on-site sketching training and expressive representation, and provided a crucial perspective for the dual inheritance of Impressionism discussed in this paper.

## 4. Teaching and Art Education Practices After Returning to China: The Transformation of the Impressionist Spirit

### 4.1 Li Shutong's Position in the History of Chinese Art Education

After returning to China in 1910, Li Shutong taught at institutions including the Tianjin Beiyang Higher Industrial School and the Zhejiang First Normal School (ZFNS), focusing his pedagogy on Western painting, calligraphy, and music. His tenure at ZFNS was particularly groundbreaking in laying the foundation for a modern art education system.

As one of China's earliest painters to receive systematic Impressionist training, Li Shutong did not confine his learning to personal creation. Instead, he proactively made Western-style sketching the core of his teaching. He advocated depicting reality and observing life, emphasizing sketching from life, light and shadow training, and changes in perspective—all direct pedagogical manifestations of Impressionist principles.

Feng Zikai recalled Li Shutong's teaching: "He taught us to emphasize observing changes in light and shadow, personally demonstrating how to establish the dominant tone and distinguish between warm and

cool hues.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, he adopted a observe-decompose-express teaching method similar to that of the TSFA. This series of pedagogical practices established Li Shutong as one of the first modern Chinese art educators to introduce Western-style sketching training models.

Li Shutong emphasized that sketching is the foundation of fine arts, viewing it not merely as technical training but elevating it to a way of observing the world. In his classes, he frequently used still lifes, models, and natural subjects to teach chiaroscuro, volumetric perspective, and dynamic capture. He used the French-published *Éléments de dessin et de composition (Illustrated Principles of Sketching and Composition)* as supplementary material in his classes. This book, widely brought back by scholars studying in Japan at the time, provided theoretical support for the structuralist techniques of late Impressionism.

This approach—starting from sensory perception and progressing from observation to expression—essentially constituted a form of modern visual cognition training. Through his teaching practice, Li Shutong introduced a perception-based model of artistic learning to Chinese art education, moving beyond the mere imitation of techniques.

#### 4.2 The Transmission and Local Adaptation of Impressionist Oil Painting Education

Impressionism emphasized expressing light through color, breaking away from the inherent color of objects, and advocating expressive methods such as atmospheric perspective. In his teaching, Li Shutong translated these principles into practical courses, encouraging students to practice simulating light and shadow using colored pencils and gouache. He established specialized classes such as “Morning Light Sketching” and “Twilight Studies.”

Furthermore, he positioned the momentary impression as the intersection of inspiration and realism in artistic expression, asserting that “sketching is not merely copying objects, but a way to perceive atmosphere.” This pedagogical philosophy transcended traditional meticulous training focused on line drawing-color filling, shifting the emphasis toward contemplating the relationship between observation and expression.

Li Shutong’s philosophy aligned closely with Cai Yuanpei’s “aesthetic education replacing religion.” He wrote: “The teaching of drawing should not merely pursue technical skill; its primary purpose is to cultivate aesthetic sensibility and moral character.”<sup>6</sup> During his time in Hangzhou, he collaborated with education colleagues to promote the inclusion of art as a standard curriculum in teacher training programs. This initiative

aimed not only to train professional artists but also to nurture the sensory awareness and aesthetic literacy of ordinary students.

In Li Shutong’s educational philosophy, aesthetic education was not a generalized cultural enlightenment but a concrete artistic approach to shaping character and emotions. This concept of art education resonated deeply with Impressionism’s aesthetic principles—that life is art and nature is spirit—forming the profound foundation of his educational philosophy.

In his teaching, Li Shutong did not simply replicate Japanese or Western pedagogical systems but consciously pursued local adaptation. For instance, he used classical Chinese subjects as models for sketching, guiding students to borrow Western techniques formally while preserving Eastern cultural imagery in content. He emphasized: “We should learn from Western painting’s realism, yet never lose our Eastern spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

This teaching model of borrowing form to express spirit transformed Impressionist visual training into a new pathway for Chinese students to understand traditional aesthetics. In curriculum structure, he also pioneered an integrated course by combining color composition with the unity of poetry and painting, which can be seen as an early prototype of China’s integrated arts education.

#### 4.3 Influence on Later Generations

Although Li Shutong’s teaching career was interrupted by his retreat into monasticism, his early educational philosophy and methods profoundly influenced subsequent art educators. For instance, although Xu Beihong primarily studied in France and advocated realism, he encountered Li Shutong’s observation-centered pedagogical philosophy during his early years at the Suzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Xu later emphasized in his own teaching “An artist’s fundamental duty is to faithfully depict what they observe. To do otherwise is tantamount to lying and will be condemned by true connoisseurs!”<sup>8</sup>

Liu Haisu recalled in 1981 that Li Shutong “was the first to advocate nude sketching,” while he himself merely “carried on his spirit.”<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the profound influence of Li Shutong’s observation-first approach to sketching. Liu Haisu later established sketching as the foundation teaching framework at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, which in part built upon the foundational logic of Li Shutong’s Impressionist pedagogy.

Following Li Shutong, China’s Impressionist tradition did not cease but evolved within its local context through the path of sketching-observation-

emotional expression. From the 1920s to the 1940s, higher art education institutions like the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts and the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts inherited his curriculum system prioritizing color and atmospheric expression. Through pedagogical practice, they progressively Sinicized this approach, using the Impressionist color system to construct a native style.

More significantly, Li Shutong's conception of Impressionism as a tool for spiritual translation influenced how China's art education community understood the relationship between modernity and national character. He repeatedly emphasized in his teaching and lectures: "Western painting excels in realism, focusing on form and appearance; Chinese painting centers on spirit and rhythm, valuing the essence of the soul."<sup>10</sup> This ensured that Impressionism was not merely imported as a technique in China but became part of an artistic ideological renewal.

Upon returning to China, Li Shutong successfully translated the spirit of Impressionism into an educational and localized framework through his teaching experience, curriculum development, and dissemination of educational philosophy. He not only inherited Impressionism's emphasis on light, color, sensation, and expression but also internalized these principles into a comprehensible and actionable learning pathway for Chinese students through course design, textbook selection, and interactive teaching methods. More significantly, he used aesthetic education as a bridge, elevating Impressionist concepts beyond painting to integrate them into the broader framework of character development and cultural enlightenment.

Li Shutong's pedagogical practice laid the theoretical foundation for modern Chinese art education by integrating sensory training with local spirit, further highlighting his dual role as a bridge between Impressionism and Chinese art education.

## 5. Cultural Identity and Artistic Choice: The Pursuit of Chinese Identity Under Impressionist Influence

### 5.1 Transformation of Artistic Identity and Shift in Cultural Affiliation

In 1918, while teaching at Zhejiang First Normal School, Li Shutong formally took monastic vows, adopting the Buddhist name Hongyi. This identity shift reflected not only his personal religious conviction but also a deliberate redefinition of his artistic life and cultural identity. His retreat into the monastic life was not an escape from secular art but the culmination of

profound reflection on the very essence of art. As Zhu Liangzhi notes in his book *A Mix of Sorrow and Joy*, the artist Li Shutong was profoundly influenced by Western artistic movements in his youth, advocating for the purification of the human heart through aesthetic education and emphasizing art's social responsibility. After becoming a monk in his later years, he increasingly integrated Buddhist philosophy into his artistic practice. This enriched the traditional aesthetic ideals of simplicity, tranquility, and transcendence in both theory and practice, completing a spiritual shift toward the Sinicization of aesthetic concepts.<sup>11</sup>

Transitioning from an art educator to a monk of the Buddhist Vinaya School, Li Shutong underwent a spiritual reorientation—from pursuing formal beauty through external forms to embodying values through inner perception. This transformation did not conflict with Impressionism's emphasis on subjective perception and opposition to academic authority; rather, it represented a response transcending technique to reach the spiritual realm. Impressionism advocated intuition and sensory experience as creative origins, while Buddhism's emphasis on contemplating the mind, emptiness of inherent nature, and seeing things as they truly are resonated philosophically and aesthetically.

Thus, Li Shutong's identity transformation should be understood as symbolizing the evolution of his artistic philosophy from artistic language to cultural faith. Impressionism's perceiving reality was reinterpreted through Eastern philosophy as directly comprehending the true nature of all phenomena. This aesthetic orientation, in turn, nourished his later artistic practice of using calligraphy as spiritual cultivation and Buddhist discipline as aesthetic education.

The core value of Impressionist oil painting lies in capturing fleeting light, shadow, and sensation. Li Shutong's early works, such as *The Little Monk* and *Self-Portrait*, already reveal a strong emphasis on atmosphere and spirit. This lyrical re-creation of nature resonates with the literati painting tradition's focus on vital energy and rhythm, laying the groundwork for his later spiritual pursuits.

In Li Shutong's aesthetic understanding, nature was not merely a subject for technical expression but also an object for meditation and contemplation. He once stated: "Chinese painting takes calligraphy as its origin, seeking spiritual resemblance while also emphasizing brush technique."<sup>12</sup> This attitude converged with the Impressionist artists' philosophy of observing objects through the heart, as advocated by Monet and Pissarro. It can be said that Li Shutong did not simply abandon art, but rather responded at a higher level to Impressionism's

emphasis on naturalness and self-perception, translating it into a Buddhist-style aesthetic meditation.

Through this process, he unified art with life experience, elevating beauty from technique to faith and transforming his creative practice from visual experience into a mode of cultural existence.

## 5.2 The Path of East-West Integration in Li Shutong's Artistic Style

Li Shutong's artistic style did not consist of a simple imitation of Western Impressionist techniques. Instead, he selectively drew upon them as resources of visual language to serve the expression of Eastern cultural spirit. His paintings frequently feature Western-style perspective and color gradation—such as using light-and-shadow transitions to outline figures in *Lady with a Fan*—yet his subjects remain classical figures steeped in Chinese imagery. This juxtaposition of technique and subject matter is not mere collage but embodies his artistic strategy of taking the West as form and the East as essence.

Technically, he employed Impressionist methods like color layering, blurred edges, and interwoven light and shadow to render texture and atmosphere. Thematically, he frequently depicted motifs central to Eastern culture: figures from Han Buddhism, women of the Jiangnan region, and the scholar's studio objects. As Chen Xing observes in "A Brief Discussion of Li Shutong's 'East-West Fusion' Painting Art": "He combined Western Impressionist techniques with the traditional Chinese aesthetic emphasis on artistic conception and spiritual resonance, embodying the distinct characteristics of a 'cultural hybrid' in East-West art."<sup>13</sup>

This path of form borrowing-spirit returning enabled Li Shutong to transcend his reliance on Western academic training in technique, developing instead a visual language imbued with indigenous cultural sensibilities.

Li Shutong's ultimate artistic choice did not stop at juxtaposing Eastern and Western techniques but lay in the transformation of his aesthetic philosophy. He emphasized that art should not remain confined to the technical level but should be elevated to a path of self-cultivation. Early on, he proposed: "Fine art is the transformation of craftsmanship and knowledge, structured by ingenious thought, capable of evoking a profound sense of beauty... The aspiration of fine art lies in the spirit."<sup>14</sup> This perspective reflects his stance of viewing art as a cultural and ethical practice.

Impressionist art championed the painter's eye and sensory truth, emphasizing the individual's immediate perception of the world. This offered Li Shutong with

a pathway from external technique to inner nature. In Buddhist aesthetics, contemplating one's true self and attaining meaning beyond form are regarded as the highest goals of aesthetic experience. The two traditions resonated in their shared spiritual emphasis on de-technicalization and inner essence, providing the theoretical foundation for his intellectual transformation toward aesthetic appreciation as spiritual practice.

In 1921, he inscribed for a disciple "Buddhist teachings are also artistic pursuits; artistic pursuits are also Buddhist teachings." This statement not only signaled his continued embrace of art but also established a profound unity between art and faith. This unity transcended the boundaries of Impressionist visual techniques and the conventions of traditional Chinese brushwork, embodying a path of aesthetic spiritualization that transcended formal constraints.

In the latter half of his artistic life, Li Shutong used Impressionism as formal inspiration and Buddhist culture as his spiritual anchor, achieving a transformative leap from master of visual techniques to cultural thinker. His East-West fusion approach was not mere compromise but a profound translation and spiritual elevation. He drew upon Impressionism's modern artistic language—color, light, shadow, and perception—to refine his formal expression in painting. Simultaneously, he returned to Eastern culture and religious spirituality in content, endowing his artistic practice with broader cultural resonance.

It is precisely through this continuous trajectory of formal borrowing-spiritual return-faith transformation that Li Shutong achieved his unique pursuit of Chinese identity. His artistic life represents both an extension of Impressionist aesthetics within the Chinese context and a profound response to the cultural self-awareness of Chinese civilization in the modern era.

## 6. Conclusion

Centered on Li Shutong's artistic practice, this paper explores how he constructed his cultural identity through the reception, internalization, and transformation of Impressionist oil painting, thereby contributing to the establishment of China's modern art education system and the establishment of aesthetic education principles.

On the level of artistic language, Li Shutong achieved visual effects of atmospheric expression and harmonious light in his works through systematic study of Impressionist techniques at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. However, unlike contemporaries such as Kuroda Seiki and Kume Keiichiro, who pursued the model

of Western techniques, Eastern spirit, Li Shutong did not imitate Impressionism as a self-contained stylistic system. Instead, he reinterpreted it through the principle of Western techniques as the body, Chinese intent as the function, transforming it into a visual language that expressed the Eastern aesthetic experience.

More significantly, Li Shutong did not stop at assimilating artistic styles. He further introduced Impressionism's spirit of sketching from life and sensory training into China's educational system, becoming a pioneering figure in early Chinese art education reform. His teaching practice at Zhejiang First Normal School demonstrated that he focused not only on technical skills but also guided students to grasp the spiritual dimension of art through visual perception, guided by the pedagogical principle of sketching as the foundation, perception as the priority. This teaching orientation resonated with the French Impressionists' emphasis on the painter's eye in their creative philosophy.

On the cultural functional level, Li Shutong played a dual role as a transmitter. On the one hand, he served as an intermediary in Sino-Japanese art education exchanges during the late Qing and early Republican periods, forming a vital bridge for the circulation of artistic and pedagogical ideas between the two countries. On the other hand, he was a key agent in aesthetic transformation of the Impressionist spirit within Chinese cultural soil, integrating the sensory intuition of Western modernist art with the traditional Chinese concept of *qiyun shengdong* vitality, and rhythm *yizai bixian* (intention precedes the brushstroke).

Ultimately, by entering monastic life, Li Shutong elevated artistic spirit into a unity of personal cultivation and religious faith. His triple identity—as artist, cultural figure, and believer—embodied a profoundly localized reinterpretation of Impressionist ideals within Eastern thought. This triadic process of technique absorption-

educational dissemination-spiritual fusion authentically encapsulates the theme of Li Shutong's dual inheritance of Impressionism throughout his artistic life.

Henan University

FU CHUNXIAO (1992-) is a female artist who received her Master of Arts degrees from the School of Art at Henan University. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Arts at the Graduate University of Mongolia and is a member of the Henan Artists Association. She has taught printmaking courses at Henan University and Shangqiu Normal University. Her artworks have been selected for the 14<sup>th</sup> National Art Exhibition, the "Book-Loving China"—3<sup>rd</sup> China Illustration and Bookbinding Art Exhibition, the National College Student Art Exhibition, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Children's Art Education Academic Exhibition. She also participated in the 2023 National Art Fund Project *Talent Development in Lithography Creation Based on Innovative Techniques*.

Editor: Yao Xiao

## ENDNOTES

1. Pan Yaochang, *History of Modern and Contemporary Art Education in China* (China Academy of Art Press, 2002), 45-68.

2. Chen Xing, Li Shutong, *An Extended Chronology of Master Hongyi* (Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2021), 55-60.

3. Zhao Liang, "A Study of the Friendship Between Li Shutong and Huang Binhong," *Cultural Arts News*, August 12, 2023.

4. Li Shutong, "A Discussion on Comparing Chinese and Western Painting," reprinted in "Quietly Listening to Artists Discuss Comparing Chinese and Western Painting," Douban, September 1, 2015. <https://m.douban.com/note/515176983/>.

5. Feng Zikai Recalls Li Shutong's Teaching. Reprinted from "Li Shutong: Life Resembles the Moon Over the Western Hills."

*Shanghai Fine Arts*. <http://art.u-p-l-u-s.cn/img3/showimg.php?id=12>.

6. Li Shutong, "Methods of Teaching Drawing," *Baiyang*, inaugural issue (May 1913): 1-3.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Xu Beihong, "The Divine Duty of Artists," "Department Bulletin of the National Central University Department of Art," *The*

*Collected Works of Xu Beihong*, Issue 1. (March 5 1944): 56.

9. Xi Wei, "Two Essays: The Master," Hong Kong *Xin Wanbao*, 1981.3.6. Reprinted from Li Lijuan, "My Grandfather Li Shutong Through My Eyes," *The Paper*, October 6, 2020.

10. Li Shutong, "A Comparison of Chinese

and Western Painting Techniques," *Baiyang*, inaugural issue, (May 1913): 1-4.

11. Zhu Liangzhi, *A Mix of Sorrow and Joy: Li Shutong* (Peking University Press, 2024).

12. Li Shutong, "A Comparison of Chinese and Western Painting Techniques" *Nüxuesheng Zazhi* (*The Female Student Magazine*), Issue

3, 1911.

13. Chen Xing, "A Brief Discussion of Li Shutong's 'East-West Fusion' Painting Art," *Fine Arts Observation*, Issue 10 (2021): 62-65.

14. Li Shutong, "The Definition of Fine Arts and Crafts," *Li Shutong Collected Works*, ed. Guo Changhai and Guo Junxi (Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2006): 48-49.

## 李叔同與印象派油畫的雙重傳承

付春曉

**摘要：**本文探討李叔同作為中國早期留日美術學人，在東京美術學校系統學習印象派油畫，歸國後實現其本土化轉化與教育傳播，將其“寫生—光色—氣氛”體系融入美術教育，推動中國現代美術教學範式變革。他以“西技為體、中意為用”，在創作中融合東方題材與印象派語言，並將藝術昇華為美育與精神修行，完成從技藝到信仰的文化轉譯，成為印象派東漸的雙重傳承者。

**關鍵詞：**印象派；美術教育；中西融合；雙重傳承