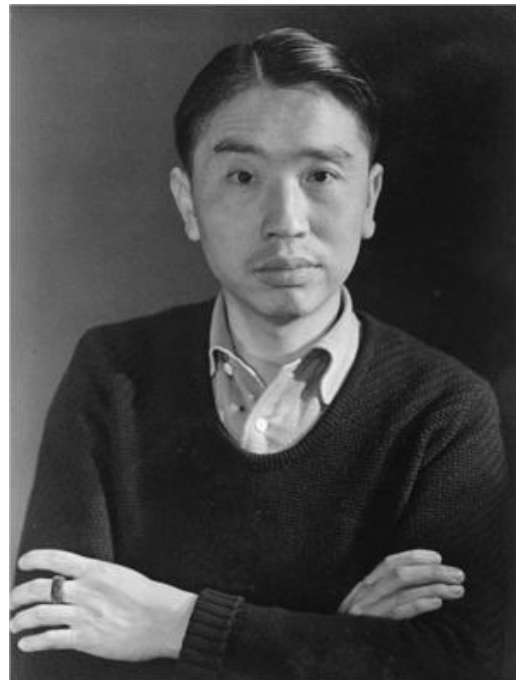


DIANE DE POLIGNAC

SANYU

(1901-1966)

A major personality of Chinese modern art, the painter Sanyu reconciled the tradition of Chinese calligraphy with contributions from western Avant-Garde painting. Living in Paris, he had the audacity to sketch nudes from live models. He is known as “the Chinese Matisse.”



BIOGRAPHY

YOUTH AND EDUCATION OF THE CHINESE PAINTER SANYU

In 1895, Sanyu was born in Nanchong in a Chinese province of Sichuan into a prosperous family that owned one of the largest silk weaving factories of the region. He was educated at home and from an early age was introduced to art, learning the basics of painting with his father an animal painter of lions and horses, and calligraphy with the famous calligrapher Zhao Xi. After time spent in Japan during 1918 and 1919, he returned to China and studied at the University of Shanghai. Sanyu then followed the movement of Chinese students sent to France through a program of studies supported by the Chinese government and in 1921 went to Paris to study art. There he met the Chinese artist Xu Beihong and his wife who had arrived a year earlier.

SETTLING IN PARIS IN THE 1920S

Sanyu settled definitively in the French capital in 1923 after time spent in Berlin. The financial support provided by his brother Junmin gave Sanyu freedom and reassurance. The Chinese painter mixed in the French capital's cosmopolitan artistic scene, visited the cafés of Montparnasse, and became interested in a whole new world that offered itself to him. Sanyu did not choose the classical path of the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Paris, but preferred to attend the Académie Libre de la Grande Chaumière where he began to draw nudes, an innovation coupled with great audacity for a Chinese artist. He also depicted his classmates in the process of drawing... There, he met Marcelle Charlotte Guyot de la Hardrouyère who became his lover and whom he married in 1928. The Chinese painter Sanyu also began to exhibit: at the Salon d'Automne in 1925 and 1928.

TWO ENCOUNTERS THAT WERE KEY FOR SANYU'S ARTISTIC REPUTATION

The painter Sanyu's work was recognized and promoted for a short time as a result of two encounters at the start of the 1930s. The first was especially fortuitous as he was already having financial difficulties, since his brother was no longer sending funds regularly. In 1929, Sanyu first met the famous dealer and collector Henri-Pierre Roché, who was at the time a dynamic and knowledgeable personality of the art market. Roché appreciated Sanyu's paintings and started to promote him among European collectors. He was himself a major collector of Sanyu, and within two years gathered and acquired 111 paintings and 600 drawings by him. Roché also contributed to the enrichment of Sanyu's creativity, encouraging him for example to make prints, in particular etchings, that allowed the artist to obtain lovely stylistic effects and also to reach a broader public at a lower cost. The Chinese painter Sanyu started at the same time to make oil paintings, revealing new potential for his work. This became his favourite medium. Through Roché, Sanyu

showed a painting at the Salon des Tuileries of 1930. The relationship was however far from being idyllic. The Chinese painter complained about being insufficiently paid for his works and always claimed more money from Roché: consequently their relations ended in 1932. Sanyu's material circumstances then worsened: his brother's death in 1931 and the bankruptcy of the family company deprived him definitively of any support from his family. The same year, his wife Marcelle asked for a divorce and left him.

This is when Sanyu met the Dutch composer Johan Franco who became his friend and agent. Not only did he appreciate this painter's work, but he also tried to promote Sanyu's painting through his network, especially in the Netherlands and Belgium. Franco engaged in many initiatives to organize exhibitions of Sanyu's art: in 1932 a solo show was devoted to him at the J.H. de Bois Gallery in Haarlem, and two solo exhibitions of his work were held at the Kunstzaal Van Lier of Amsterdam in 1933 and 1934. However, despite all these efforts, success was limited and Sanyu's paintings didn't sell.

At the same time, while integrated into the European art world, the painter Sanyu continued to maintain artistic connections with the Chinese art milieu. The famous painter Zhang Daqian appreciated his work and thus in 1961 Sanyu prepared the catalogue of his exhibition at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris. In 1933, Sanyu was also selected among 82 Chinese painters to exhibit at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris.

SANYU AND PING-TENNIS, AN ALTERNATIVE TO ART

His glaring lack of money forced the Chinese painter Sanyu to look for other sources of income: in the mid-1930s he invented a new racket sport, ping-tennis and tried to promote it in France, Germany and even in New York, without much success.

During the war, his financial situation was extremely difficult: due to a lack of money he could not buy the art materials he needed and only exhibited sculptures of animals and figures made from painted plaster at salons (the Salon des Indépendants).

THE CHINESE PAINTER SANYU IN NEW YORK, HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH ROBERT FRANK

In 1948, Sanyu decided to go to New York to promote his ping-tennis. He lodged in the studio of the photographer Robert Frank with whom he was friendly. To support his friend's work, Robert Frank organized an exhibition for Sanyu in New York, however nothing was sold.

The painter returned to Paris in 1950, but his financial situation didn't improve. He sold little, surviving by painting a few pieces of furniture and doing some carpentry work. His social position worsened too and he became more and more lonely and withdrawn. This state of mind appears in his mature art in the seriousness and severity of his subjects: nudes of exacerbated eroticism, solitary animals, austere still lifes, and deserted landscapes.

Thanks to Robert Frank, the Chinese painter Sanyu nevertheless met other European artists such as the painter Jacques Monory and his wife Sabine, the sculptors Marcel van Thienen, Philippe Hiquily and Alberto Giacometti with whom he became friendly.

THE 1960S: SANYU'S WORK IS RECOGNIZED IN TAIWAN

The start of the 1960s seemed to be promising for Sanyu. The Taiwanese Education Minister, Huang Jilu visited his studio in 1963 and invited him to teach at the National Taiwan Normal University. Above all, he suggested that Sanyu organize a solo exhibition at the Taipei National Museum of History. The following year, Sanyu thus sent 42 paintings for his exhibition in Taipei, but for an unknown reason was not able to travel to Taiwan himself.

In 1965, the painter Sanyu also participated in a group show at the gallery of Natacha and Etienne Lévy in Paris that included four other Chinese artists: Zao Wou-Ki, Zhu Dequn, Pan Yuliang and Xi Dejin.

Sanyu died in mysterious circumstances in 1966, officially from accidental gas poisoning in his studio. He died in extreme poverty. Unlike his Chinese contemporaries Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian who returned to China after training in Europe and became famous there, Sanyu had preferred to stay in Paris to continue his artistic experiments, carried by the wave of modernity that engulfed the City of Lights.

The work of this Chinese painter became spectacularly famous after his death.

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Translation: Jane Mac Avock

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Paris, Musée Cernuschi

Paris, Centre national des arts plastiques

Paris, Musée national d'art moderne

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Salon d'Automne, Paris, 1925, 1928, 1946

Salon des Tuileries, Paris, 1930, 1932, 1936, 1947

Salon des Indépendants, Paris, 1932, 1938, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1948, 1954, 1955, 1956

Solo exhibition, J.H. de Bois Gallery, Haarlem (Netherlands), 1932

Group exhibition, Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris, 1933

Solo exhibitions, Kunstzaal van Lier, Amsterdam, 1933, 1934

Paris Club Féminin, Paris, 1946

Solo exhibition, Musée national d'Histoire, Taipei, 1964

Group exhibition, chez Natacha et Etienne Lévy, Paris, 1965

Solo exhibitions, Galerie Jean-Claude Riedel, Paris, 1963, 1992, 1993, 2002

Sanyu, Taiwan, Dimensions Art Center, Taipei, 1992

The Art of Sanyu, Musée national d'Histoire, Taipei, 1995

In search of homeland, The Art of San Yu, Musée national d'Histoire, Taipei, 2001

Sanyu, L'écriture du corps, Musée Guimet, Paris, 2004

Sanyu, A pioneering Avant-Garde in Chinese Modernist Art, The Tina Keng Galerie, Taipei, 2013

Sanyu, Galerie Diane de Polignac, Paris, 2016

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In search of homeland, The Art of San Yu, exhibition catalogue, Taipei, National Museum of History, 2001

Sanyu, L'écriture du corps, exhibition catalogue, Skira, 2004

Rita Wong, *SANYU Catalogue Raisonné Oil Paintings*, Yageo Foundation, 2001

Rita Wong, *SANYU Catalogue Raisonné Oil Paintings Volume Two*, The Li Chin Foundation, 2011

Rita Wong, *SANYU Catalogue Raisonné Drawings and Watercolors*, The Li-Ching Foundation, 2015

