

Drawing in China

Art and Art Education in the Wake of Modern China

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Due to its long history, Chinese painting has developed its own forms, contents and techniques. Unique materials, such as rice paper, brush and ink are elements of classical Chinese painting. But Chinese art has always been significantly more than just learning the technique of painting. Worldview, sense of esthetics and a noble personality were always guidelines of art and art education in China. Although Western art and its techniques was known in China as early as the 16th century, there was no systematic application and usage of drawing comparable to academy level up until the beginning of the twentieth century.

An early influence of Western art is documented during the Qing dynasty, where Chinese painters became assistants to Western artists in order to learn their painting techniques, for example the concept of perspective. A well-known Western artist was Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). Castiglione was born in Milan, turned Jesuit and spent over 50 years as a court painter and architect for three emperors of the Qing dynasty. He died in Beijing on July 17, 1766. He became well known for his merging of Chinese and Western style in his paintings (» *Fig. 1*).



Fig. 1 Giuseppe Castiglione, *Ma-Cang Lays Low the Enemy Ranks (part)*, ink and color on paper, 38,4 x 285,9 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipeh.

Traditionally, education was that of a master and apprentice. A typical occupation until the end of the nineteenth century was that of apprentices focusing primarily on copying art works of their masters, whereas drawing, as it had developed through the Renaissance, had little impact. Paintings were predominantly geared towards the wishes of the emperor, however the educational approach during the last dynasty adopted knowledge of perspective, color and light, and bore first elements of modern education in China.¹

China's educational reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century

From the First Opium War (1839–1842) until beginning of the twentieth century, China was caught up in a series of military conflicts with Western nations². In order to maintain the empire and its structures and at the same time to push for necessary reforms, the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) instated the “Self-Strengthening Movement” that promoted the “learning of Western techniques”. This approach was supposed to gain practical advantages through the introduction of progressive Western methods and therefore stabilize existing political structures.

The political movement “Hundred Days of Reform 1898” (Wuxu Bianfa 戊戌变法) was supposed to reform the empirical structures “from within.” These reform efforts however could not prevent the cessation of the empire – amidst the ongoing military conflicts with Western nations and Japan. Even after the Republic of China was founded in 1912, the country remained in a state of massive political, economic and sociocultural reconstruction.³

The primary problem during this restructuring of the educational system was the lack of teachers on all levels of education. The demand for teachers was so excessively high that it promoted the foundation of a series of private schools.

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese students were regularly sent abroad for education. Due to the defeat after The First Sino-Japanese War, Japan was considered to be advanced and therefore an ideal country for the further education of Chinese people. Both countries shared lingual and cultural similarities that facilitated this development. Those first Chinese students with education in Japan are considered the first generation of internationally educated students. These gradually

1 Pan 2003, p. 10.

2 For example, Great Britain, France, USA and Russia. A first defeat against Great Britain in 1842 (First Opium War) followed several other military conflicts that led to a series of lopsided treaties regulating trade and land leases. Hu 2011, p. 27.

3 Hu 2011, p. 27.

replaced the many Japanese teachers employed by Chinese schools. Politically, this was considered an important measure to decrease Japan's direct influence in China.

After WW I, Chinese students preferred European countries and the U.S. for education abroad as they were aware that Japan itself learned its methods from Western nations. Students educated in Europe and the U.S. later had a profound influence on China's art education.⁴

In 1919 China experienced a political movement known as "May Fourth Movement." This movement developed out of the "New Culture Movement" started around 1915 that was driven by academics rejecting classical culture. This movement favored human rights standards typical for Western nations and demanded the promotion of modern Western techniques.

This movement had a distinctively open character and intended to influence the population's opinion. Traditional Confucian values were considered to be responsible for the political weakness, and the movement called for a rejection of these values and the selective adoption of Western ideals. Leading guidelines for this restructuring movement were "Science" and "Democracy," as applied by Western nations. This movement initiated a change in social sciences, such as language and script education, literature, philosophy, as well as art and music toward what was considered modern.

This cultural movement also initiated a crisis in Chinese art that resulted in a broad dismissal of traditional Chinese painting. In those days, traditional Chinese painting lost substantially in reputation. Traditional painting was considered "unscientific" and "backward oriented." In an attempt to "improve" Chinese painting, many young people were led to go abroad in search of means to improve Chinese art. Typical for this development are differences in the value perception of their own Chinese and that of foreign Western art. A rather concrete solution for an improvement of Chinese painting came to be known as the "melting style." The "melting style" was not only a new style in Chinese painting but also offered new content and direction in the art of painting.

Due to the reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century, drawing, more precisely the drawing of plaster objects, was introduced to the curriculum of art schools at various levels of education. Aside from that, the curriculum also included traditional Chinese painting with brush stroke and calligraphy.

The first educational school to offer a course in drawing for art teachers was the university of Nanjing (两江师范学堂 *Liangjiang shifan xuetang*), which was founded in 1902. In 1906 the university received an extension for the education of art teachers.

4 For example Li Shutong (1880–1942) and Gao Jianfu (1879–1951) both to Japan, Li Tiefu (1869–1952) to the USA, Zhang Daofan (1897–1968) to England/France, Lü Sibai (1905–1973) to France. Hu 2011, pp. 231–232.

This counts as the start of art education in modern China.⁵ The course in drawing included exercises in drawing with a pencil and coal.

Since then many other educational schools with a curriculum including drawing and handicraft were put into place, for example in Tianjin (北洋师范学堂 *Beiyang shifan xuetaang*) and Zhejiang (浙江两级师范学堂 *Zhe Jiang liangji shifan xuetaang*).

The second opium war (1856–1860) initiated various students going abroad for studies. Most went to Japan to study painting. Particularly noteworthy is Zhou Xiang (1871–1933)⁶. Zhou initially studied Chinese painting, but due to his involvement in the flawed reform movement “Hundred Days of Reform 1898,” he opted to continue his studies abroad. Around the turn of the century, he went first to Japan, then to Europe. In the course of almost ten years of studies abroad, he returned to China in 1910. In 1911 he founded the private “School for Chinese and Western painting.” The school had been renamed several times into (中西图画函授学堂 *Zhongxi tuhua hanshou xuetaang*), to *Bujinghua chuanxi suo* (布景画传习所), *Shanghai youhua yuan* (上海油画院) and finally to *Zhonghua meishu daxue* (中华美术大学).

The school offered courses in painting, calligraphy and carving for its initial 30 students. As photography became popular during these years, the school offered special courses for the commercial production of background motives for photography studios. After 15 years of existence, the school closed primarily because its focus was too much on catering to commercial needs. However, the school had some significant impact on students that would become of importance for the future Chinese art culture.

As teachers in many institutions for art education were actual artists, obvious reciprocal developments in art and art education could be observed. Teachers had either lived and studied abroad for a long time or had, due to their travel activity, a noticeable influence from Western art. Also personal opinions of these artists had a strong influence. Best known artists of this “melting style” were Xu Beihong (1895–1953), Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) and Liu Haisu (1896–1994).

Liu Haisu (1896–1994) played a decisive role in the development of modern-time art education in China. Born in the city of Changzhou, he learned painting from early on. Zhou Xiang was his teacher for Western painting. Liu, together with young artists Wu Shiguang and Wang Yachen, founded the Drawing and Art School of Shanghai (上海图画美术院 *Shanghai tuhua meishuyuan*) in 1912⁷. Progressive and somewhat scandalized in public were the school’s teaching program for nude drawing. This institution in Shanghai counts as the first modern Chinese private art school. Liu was 17 at that time.

5 Pan 2003, p. 19; Chen Ruilin 2007, p. 51.

6 Hu 2011, pp. 59–62.

7 The school in its course of operation was once renamed to Vocational Art School of Shanghai. (上海美术专门学校 *Shanghai meishu zhuanmen xuexiao*).

Fig. 2 Liu Haisu, *Huang Shan*, ink and colour on paper, 1190 x 4930 mm, 1985, Great Hall of the People Beijing Description: Lius favourite subject was the painting of landscapes, in particular the mountain range Huang Shan.



In 1915 nude drawing became part of the curriculum for the Art School of Shanghai. The first model was a 15-year-old boy. Grown-up males followed. With the summer exhibition in 1917 some of these drawings were exhibited, which generated a good amount of discussion. In 1919 Liu and another artist organized an exhibition that included figure oil paintings. A civil servant issued a protest with the authorities that nude art would have a negative effect of public morale. The authorities ordered Liu to remove the paintings. Luckily, the exhibition came to an end anyhow. In the early 1920s, public opinion somewhat calmed down, only to heat up again in 1924 with an exhibition of pieces of nude art organized through the Art School of Shanghai in the city of Jiangxi (Nanchang province). The local police ordered a discontinuation of the exhibition including the destruction of the art works. In 1925 the authorities successfully put in place a prohibition for the use of nude models. Despite Liu Haisu's efforts to convince the educational department and the general public of the value of nude art as part of art education, many conservatives verbally attacked Liu up until a point in 1926 where Liu faced imprisonment. With the aid of the French ambassador, the dispute was cleared with a trial.⁸

This controversy was highly symbolic for the fight between conservative forces and a new China and had a significant impact on the development of Chinese culture in the course of the twentieth century. From the foundation until 1952, Liu was head of this school. Nowadays, this school counts as a milestone for art education and art development in modern China.⁹ Liu and his own painting style later became part of the style known as the “melting style” (» Fig. 2).

8 Hu 2011, pp. 91–92.

9 Hu 2011, pp. 85–92.

Lin Fengmian (1900–1990), another important figure in the modern development of art and art education, was born on November 22, 1900 in the province of Guangdong. His grandfather was a mason and therefore also had some proficiency in wood carving. Furthermore, his father was known as a good painter. When Lin turned six, he started learning to paint assisted by his father. He practiced painting from the “Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting” (芥子园画谱), a compilation of art exercises first issued in 1679. He furthered his expertise through education in France. His teacher of that time was Hubert Yancesse, who later recommended Lin applied to the Cormons Studio in Paris.¹⁰

After his return to China, Lin Fengmian became the first president of the State Art Academy. He later accepted a position as president to the Committee of Art Education in Nanjing.¹¹

Lin’s personal painting style differed significantly from Liu Haisu’s. His style favored exaggerated forms, abundant and an almost courageous use of color. Compositions were typically quadratic. Lin used mainly ink and applied techniques of wiping, but rarely can an expression of traditional Chinese ink painting be detected. As an inspiration he deliberately ignored a natural form and rather concentrated on putting some expression of feelings into his works. Part of Lin’s inspiration came from Expressionism (» *Fig. 3*).

Lin Wenzheng (1903–1989), as the curriculum’s coordinator for the academy, put together a curriculum following his vision for China’s Academy of Art in 1934. A special focus was put on the function of drawing within this curriculum in a very European understanding:

Painting, sculpting and design all belong to the art of design and composition and therefore have the same basis. As mathematics is a part of natural science, drawing is a part of design and composition. It was an initial mistake of our schools to ignore the importance of drawing. The apprentice was taught a bit of drawing with a pencil to be followed immediately by water colour and oil painting. This educational approach can be compared to a baby being put in an athletics competition. There is no free fall into this matter. Addressing this mistake, we have put a special focus on drawing in the first two years of the upper level, where a specialization follows in the third year. The expertise shown in drawing determines the choice of a specialization. If highest proficiency in drawing is reached, students can be admitted to the department of painting or to all other departments. If a good level of proficiency in drawing is reached, students can be admitted to the departments of sculpting or design. With an average proficiency, they can still be admitted to the department of design.¹²

10 Hu 2011, pp. 93–94.

11 Lin 1996, pp. 123–158; Lin 1999, pp. 229–298.

12 Lin 1999, pp. 153–157.

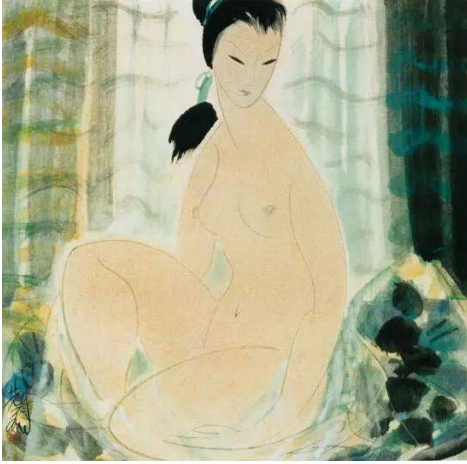


Fig. 3 Lin Fengmian, *Nude*, ink and color on paper, 67 x 68 cm, 1980s, Shanghai Chinese Painting Academy.

Xu Beihong's part in the development of drawing and art education

The artist and art teacher Xu Beihong played a decisive role in the introduction of drawing in China. Xu Beihong was born on July 19th, 1895 in the Yixing province of Jiangsu. His father was a professional painter and educated his son in traditional Chinese ink painting.

At the age of 18, he went to Japan for further studies, but returned due to financial shortage. Shortly thereafter in 1919 he went to Europe for further education and spent time primarily in France, Germany and in Italy. Aside from his studies, Xu organized numerous Chinese art exhibitions in Germany. After his return to China, he applied his knowledge to his teachings at the art academy.¹³

Xu Beihong's stay in Europe was guided by a clear vision to find means to improve Chinese painting. As young Xu Beihong arrived in Paris in 1921, many classical works as displayed in various museums left him with a profound impression. For instance, he is known to have made several copies of Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Night Watch*. His excitement sparked by these impressions was to play a decisive role in his later stage of creating art. Considerable influence came from two of Xu's teachers in Paris (Pascal Adolphe Dagnan-Bouveret 1852–1929 and Francois Flameng 1856–1923). These two were part of a classical movement that saw a Renaissance-inspired “imitation of nature” as a priority for art education. He studied drawing for two months at the Académie Julian before he was admitted the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts in Paris.

13 Hu 2011, pp. 105–111.

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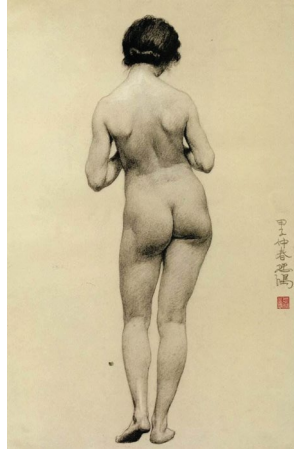
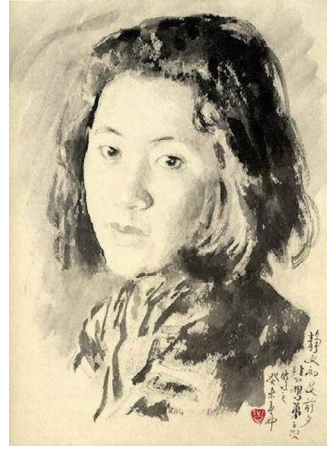


Fig. 4 Xu Beihong, *Woman*, coal on paper, 32 x 50 cm, 1924, Xu Beihong Museum, Beijing.

Fig. 5 Xu Beihong, *Wife of the artist*, ink on paper, 36.5 x 27.5 cm, 1943, Xu Beihong collection of drawings, People's Art Press 1985.



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Due to Xu Beihong's studies at the art academy, he came to the conclusion that drawing is an important element of art education (» *Fig. 4 and 5*).

Before Xu Beihong went to Europe, he already had a clear preconception of the function of painting. He stressed that it is his conviction that a painting had to display “reality” in combination with “beauty.” Chinese painting was missing a sense of realistic depiction in particular. Xu was convinced that realistic drawing and its possibilities was an important way to improve Chinese art. However, its incorporation in Chinese art education happened to be quite a task as the method of drawing was unknown to classical Chinese art. His special way of combining Chinese and nineteenth-century Western tradition was a fair attempt to assist in a further development of Chinese art. Xu Beihong's (as he calls it) “weapon:” the method of drawing and the ability of composition have made the art education of traditional Chinese painting measureable and tangible. Drawing was introduced as a new element in Chinese painting, which helped develop a new style in painting: “ink plus drawing” or rather “brush stroke plus composition.”

Sketch (素描 *su miao*) is a central task for Xu Beihong, concerning not only his own creative work but also his educational activities. As early as 1926 he described drawing to be “base knowledge” for the art of painting. At a much later stage in 1947 he proclaimed that “the study of art needs drawing as a basis.” In 1947 Xu Beihong claimed that he was the first to officially introduce sketch to China.

His claim for decisive improvements, for example for portrait painting, can not only be seen in his own paintings but had some influence on Chinese art in general. He clearly described his demands in his essay on “Method of improving Chinese painting.”

As Xu Beihong taught at the National Central University of Nanjing (南京国立中央大学 1928–1949), drawing was considered the most important course. Students

were obliged to go through basic training in drawing for two years. In the third year, they started with Chinese painting in order to practice the introduction form and shape into Chinese painting. He was convinced that it is important to master the shape of four objects: Human beings, animals (two-legged and four-legged likewise), flowers and trees.

This system of education was further refined at Beijing's art school as well as the central academy of art.

In 1931 there was a discussion between Xu Beihong and two of his students in respect to the importance of sketch:

Question: Can there be a development of a deeper understanding of art even without practicing sketch?

Xu: Certainly, there can be. One can practice oil and watercolor painting and other methods in a similar way to sketch. The effect is the same. Not all artists have had practice in sketch.

Question: You certainly stress the importance of sketch and demand up to 1000 sketches – why?

Xu: Sketch is an effective and practical approach to painting. But it is not the only method. Some people claim that copying (临摹 *lin mo*) is a substitute for drawing nature (写生 *xie sheng*). That can be a valuable method as well. But this method of copying is not taking nature as the original, and has its limitations. When merely copying, one does not practice being observant. Artists should be able to identify the entire surrounding, should even learn to feel it. One measure of evaluating art is in which magnitude an artist expresses the depth of his feelings.

Question: Some claim sketch hinders ingenuity¹⁴. What is your opinion?

Xu: The development of a genius is a long process of diligence and intelligence. Only lazy people think that a genius is born. If there is such a thing as a genius by birth then there is no method to prevent such ingenuity.¹⁵

14 A claim often brought against Xu Beihong.

15 与刘汝醴，顾了然谈素描

刘、顾问：“不习素描，是否可以深入艺术的堂奥？”

徐答：“当然可以。用油画、水彩或其他工具，从事与素描同样的练习，其效果也相等。不过费事，多一层明暗与色彩的分辨。艺术家，并非全从素描之路走过来的。”

刘、顾问：“先生强调素描，要求同学习作三百至一千幅素描，为什么？”

In contrast to his many passionate speeches and debates, this dialogue reflects his viewpoint in a much more reasonable and rational way.

Xu Beihong's central argument proclaims "improvement of Chinese painting" was a definite product of popular opinion at that time. His theory "Drawing is the basis of all art, as mathematics is the basis of (natural) science" is obviously derived from the "New Culture Movement".

Modern China after 1949 and drawing in school

Although Xu Beihong died in 1953, his particular form of realistic depiction inspired by drawing established itself as an important element of painting in China. Xu Beihong's impact for the promotion of realistic depiction has not only had a great influence on Chinese figure painting but also established drawing as mandatory throughout all Chinese art education institutions, regardless of the level taught.

A particularly noteworthy companion of Xu Beihong is Jiang Zhaohe (1904–1986). He started teaching himself drawing with coal in young years. In 1920 he moved to Shanghai to work as an artist for the advertisement industry and as a designer of clothing. Additionally, he taught himself Western painting. He got to know Xu Beihong in 1927 who helped him become employed at the Central University of Nanjing to be a teacher of design for two years. Around 1935 Jiang developed a special technique of portrait painting with ink, but inspired by Western sketch techniques. This approach is considered rather close to Xu Beihong's idea of the "melting style", but differed noticeably from Xu's techniques. Jiang favored circumcising with lines, followed by dry strokes to be finalized with coloring (» *Fig. 6*).¹⁶

As a result, a new technique of brush movement came about to enable "realistic depiction" with "free-style script." This enhanced the ability of expression within Chinese

徐答：“素描是学习绘画便捷而有效的好方法，但不是唯一的方法。有人主张以临摹替代写生，像某些人所做那样，也不失是一种方法。但是这种方法，只看粉本，不师造化，局限性大，多走弯路，患害实深。……临摹家往往认识不到观察世界的重要意义，错误地把绘事看做只是笔墨’问题。把眼睛和头脑的作用闲却了，故不可取。……艺术家对自己处身的周围不能没有认识也不能没有感受。艺术的评价标准，是通过艺术家成熟的表现能力，传达他对生活感受的深度为依据的。”

刘、顾问：“人言素描足以束缚天才，(当时的反对派都持此论)先生怎么看？”

徐笑答：“天才是长期勤奋得来的智慧累积，只有懒人才相信生而知之。世上如有天才，岂有束缚天才之具？”

(刘汝醴教授整理)原载《美术文集》，1982年9月南京师范学院美术学院庆祝建系八十周年特刊

Xu, Beihong 2001, in: Wang, Zhen & Xu, Boyang (eds.). p. 161.



Fig. 6 Jiang Zhaohé, *Liu Min Tu* (part), ink and color on paper, 200 x 1202 cm, 1943, The National Art Museum of China.



Fig. 7 Jiang Zhaohé, *Du Fu*, ink on paper, 131 x 90 cm, 1959, Historic Museum China.

ink painting. Jiang's ink on rice paper picture shows traditional elements, such as inscriptions and seal, but the treatment of bright- and darkness, shadows and perspective are derived from drawing with pencil (» *Fig. 7*).

Another noteworthy person to mention is Li Hu (1919–1975). Li Hu was a student with Xu Beihong at the National central university of Nanjing. Li attempted to copy oil painting with traditional ink und rice paper, which generated some praise from his teacher Xu.¹⁷ At a later stage, he taught at the Central Art Academy of Beijing, where he was also influenced by Jiang Zhaohé. Li Hu's works are considered an expressive style of Chinese paintings, particularly in his composition, application of inscriptions and movement of the brush, but also shows aspects of precise modeling, perspective, light and shadow.

Whereas Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohé primarily furthered the integration of Western style realistic depiction of figure painting in the 1930s and 40s, it was, among others, Li Hu who had a strong impact on portrait painting in the 1950s and 60s. He primarily opted for the use of rather lush colors in oil paintings and new techniques for water color paintings (» *Fig. 8*).

17 Liao 1996, p. 176

Proficiency in drawing nowadays is an integral part of higher education in China, for specialization in oil painting, sculpturing, as well as for the education of Chinese ink painting. For example, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, students in the department for Chinese painting initially spend time with elementary education, including drawing, drawing with lines, followed by copying of landscape and flower and bird paintings, as well as drawing portraits (» *Fig. 9 and 10*) before choosing a specialization for a Bachelor of Arts.¹⁸

Nowadays, the development in art and art education in a vast country like China differs considerably. Therefore it is more important than ever, that the academy stresses a solid basic education in preparation for an art degree. Sketch started out 100 years ago to be a part in art education and has gained an integrally important status in Chinese art education.

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Fig. 8 Li Hu, *Guan Hanqing*, ink on paper, 85 x 60 cm, 1962, Collection of Li Hu, Huan People's Art Press 2015.

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Fig. 9 A Student's work at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing), pencil on paper, 2010.

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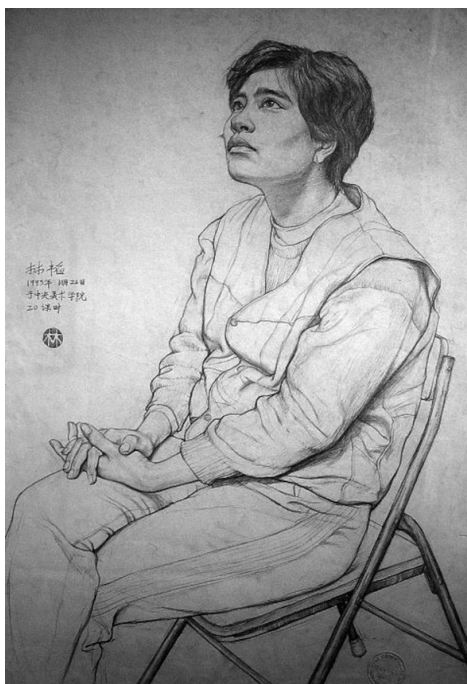


Fig. 10 A Student's work of the Central Academy of Arts with proficiency after twenty lessons, pencil on paper, 1993, private collection.

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