

The creation and collection trend of oil painting in the period of republic of China

Jiang Feihu^{1, a, *},

¹Beijing Fine Art Academy Art Museum No. 12 Chaoyang Park South Road, Chaoyang District Beijing, 100026, China
a.jiangfeihu_2021@126.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: The Republican period (1912–1949) was the "golden age" for the development of Chinese oil painting, marking its true academic inception. This paper takes oil painting creations from the Republican period as the research subject, systematically analyzing the historical background, practical context, representative painters, and their aesthetic styles of that time. It particularly focuses on the current status and market trends of the collection market for works by Republican-era oil painters such as Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, Yan Wenliang, and Liu Haisu. Research indicates that oil painting during the Republican period integrated Chinese and Western cultural elements, forming a nationalized artistic aesthetic value orientation dominated by realism. This period holds a milestone significance in the history of Chinese oil painting, connecting the past with the future. From a market perspective, Republican-era oil painting has become a focal point in the art market, with Xu Beihong's works serving as the "blue-chip stocks" of the oil painting market, repeatedly setting auction records. As China's economy develops and the local collector base becomes more professional and systematic, the collection market for Republican-era oil painting shows promising development prospects and significant appreciation potential. This paper aims to provide a valuable reference for the study of aesthetic appreciation and market collection of oil painting creations from the Republican period.

Keywords: Republican period, oil painting creation, aesthetic appreciation, collection market, Xu Beihong, nationalization, realism, art market

1. Introduction

Chinese culture and art have a long and profound history. Among the over 5,000 years of artistic civilization, there exists a historical period symbolizing the "golden age" of Chinese oil painting—the Republic of China (1912–1949). It was during this unique historical era that Chinese oil painting truly began to develop academically. However, constrained by various factors and environmental limitations, the nascent academic development of Chinese oil painting faced significant pressures. This very environment contributed to the stagnation of Republican-era oil painting in later times, ultimately leading to its transformation into an artistic aesthetic carrier emblematic of an era. Such a trajectory was determined by the specific historical circumstances of the Republic of China. Regardless, oil painting creations from the Republican period hold substantial practical significance and serve as milestones for the subsequent development of Chinese oil painting toward nationalized aesthetic characteristics.

With the continuous evolution of time, today in the 21st century, as China has traversed a century of oil painting history, the aesthetic appreciation and collection trends for Republican-era oil painting have become increasingly positive. This period's creations now more vividly reflect their original artistic spirit and inherent value orientation, thereby highlighting their unique academic significance and market impact. Oil painting from the Republican era has also become a focal point in the art market, with auction records for oil paintings repeatedly reaching new heights. Based on this, the following analysis of the aesthetic appreciation and collection market context of Republican-era oil painting aims to provide valuable insights for the study of this special period's oil painting creations and their market collection.

2. Republican-Era oil painting: creation and collection overview

Oil painting during the Republican period, both in terms of artistic aesthetics and market collection, reflects the emerging aesthetic trends of the Republic of China in a unique historical era. This period served as a crucial transitional phase in the development of Chinese oil painting, bridging the past and the future. It witnessed the emergence of numerous oil painters who studied or traveled abroad in countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan, as well as those rooted in China, including Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, Yan Wenliang, and Liu Haisu. These artists, representing the direction of Chinese oil painting development at the time, integrated Western and Eastern aesthetic concepts, creative techniques, artistic styles, and expressive spirit into their creations, significantly showcasing the artistic aesthetic state of oil painting development during the Republican period. During this time, a classicism-dominated aesthetic style also emerged. Many oil painters and their works, while drawing inspiration from Western painting concepts, systematically mastered Western oil painting techniques. Moreover, they engaged in contemporary explorations and aesthetic expressions in their choice of themes.

Based on the hundreds of representative works from this period collected by major museums and art galleries across China, a comprehensive reflection of the development process and aesthetic spirit of Chinese oil painting in the first half of the 20th century is evident. The oil painting creations of this era, displayed in the exhibition spaces of major museums and art galleries worldwide, have given rise to a unique historical sentiment and aesthetic character. From the very beginning of their learning from the West, oil painters engaged in deep reflection and exploration, actively pursuing artistic practices to successfully adapt oil painting to a nationalized context. They boldly innovated and continuously refined aesthetic styles such as realism, romanticism, and impressionism, distinctly reflecting a nationalized artistic aesthetic value orientation predominantly rooted in realism. For instance, the market value of Xu Beihong's paintings once surged significantly, driving the revival of the oil painting collection market. Additionally, with the passage of time and the diversification of aesthetics, the prices of Lin Fengmian's oil paintings have gradually risen, while the market for works by artists such as Yan Wenliang, Wu Dayu, Liu Haisu, and Pan Yuliang has also entered a phase of growth. The collection market for oil paintings from the Republican period has shown a steadily upward trend.



Figure 1: Leaning on the Table by Xu Beihong, oil on canvas, 73cm × 59cm

3. Historical context of republican-era oil painting

Oil painting creation during the special historical era of the Republic of China integrated diverse cultural contexts, allowing traditional Chinese culture to absorb beneficial elements amid the eastward spread and impact of Western culture. This formed specific artistic aesthetic trends influenced by the historical environment. The history of Western oil painting's introduction to China can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty. Although oil painting was introduced early and took initial shape during the Ming and Qing dynasties, spreading within a limited scope, its dissemination was confined to the aristocracy due to China's closed social system, becoming a "plaything" for the nobility. After the Opium Wars, learning from the West became a trend, and oil painting began to take root and flourish in China under the influence of the era. With the collapse of the Qing Dynasty's ruling system at the beginning of the Republic of China, national sentiment gradually surged, and more people realized the principle that "the rise and fall of the nation is the responsibility of every citizen." During the Self-Strengthening Movement, the slogans "learn from foreigners' strengths to subdue them" and "learn from foreigners' strengths to strengthen ourselves" gained greater advocacy and response. This led to emulating the West not only in economy and politics but also in culture, particularly in art, as large numbers of students went abroad to study "foreign languages and paintings."

After the May Fourth Movement, Western culture spread widely in China, liberating people's minds from feudal ethics. Progress in civilization, economic development, and the opening of the country's doors encouraged more Chinese to turn their attention to the Western world. Waves of Chinese students studied or traveled abroad, returning around the time of the May Fourth Movement in the early 20th century. While bringing back science and technology, they also infused new vitality into the Chinese art scene, providing opportunities for the development of emerging Chinese culture and art. Oil painting, as a Western art form, gradually began to spread and develop in China, giving rise to many outstanding oil painting artists. They enthusiastically participated in the new cultural and artistic movements, bringing hope and challenges to the stagnant Chinese art scene. At the time, oil painting lacked a market while Chinese painting enjoyed favorable conditions, so many painters worked on both oil paintings and Chinese paintings to meet market demands.

Furthermore, due to continuous warfare and political instability, painters shifted their focus to the harsh realities of the time, engaging in patriotic movements to resist Japanese aggression and save the nation. Republican-era oil painting did not develop well, as the wars plunged the burgeoning art form into a trough, dealing it a severe blow. On the other hand, realism oil painting, led by Xu Beihong, gained an advantage in the debate between realism and modernism by combining realistic spirit with a series of historical themes related to the Chinese nation, aligning with the political context of national salvation. Realism gradually became the mainstream aesthetic style of Republican-era oil painting, shaping the aesthetic trends of Chinese oil painting art over the following century.



Figure 2: Sketches of Jiming Temple by Xu Beihong, oil on canvas, 47.4cm × 65cm

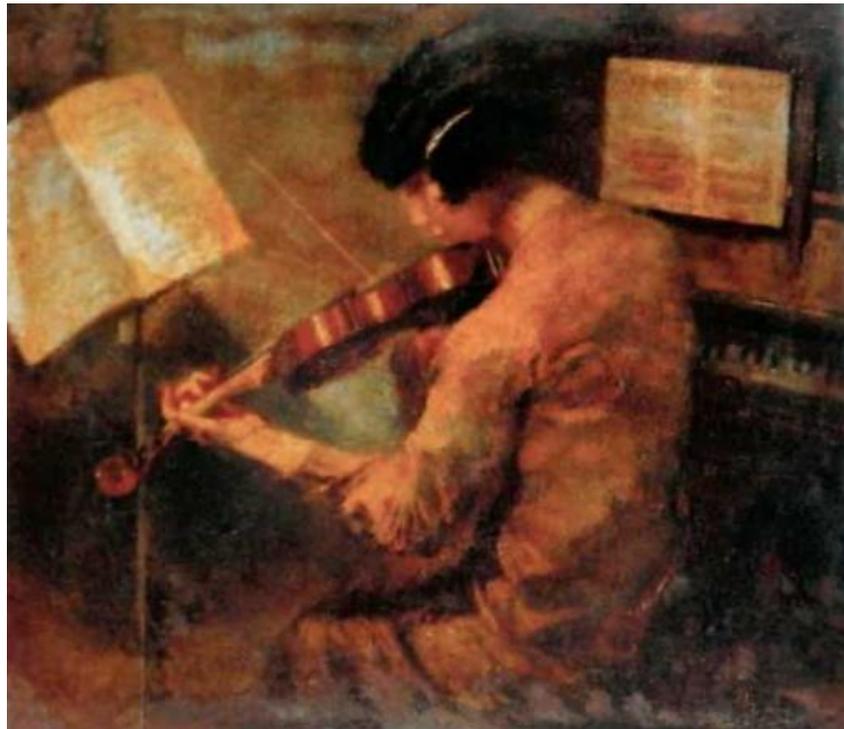


Figure 3: Piano Lesson by Xu Beihong, oil on canvas, 38cm × 45cm

4. Republican-Era oil painters: Representatives and aesthetics

The representative painters of oil painting creation during the Republican period and their aesthetic styles, to a large extent, hold significance in expanding national sentiment and artistic cultivation. Overall, they reflect the pursuit of grand aestheticism, nationalism, diverse artistic conceptions, varied emotional connections, pure art, and the authentic representation of the spirit of beauty. Through the painters' restraint of emotions, perception of reality, rational contemplation, expression of spirituality, aesthetic reflection, artistic inheritance, bold expression, spiritual expansion, and gradual innovation, the national integrity and civilized spirit inherent in Chinese art are demonstrated. This comprehensively highlights the aesthetic sensibilities and stylistic tones of oil painting artists during the Republican period, vividly reproducing the

aesthetic characteristics and zeitgeist that Republican-era oil painting artists and their works should embody. Examples of representative painters from this period include Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, Yan Wenliang, Liu Haisu, Guan Liang, Pan Yuliang, and others.

5. Republican-Era oil painting: Market Status & Trends

On the basis of comprehensively examining the aesthetic appreciation and market collection of oil painting creations during the Republican period, and after discussing the historical background, practical context, representative painters, and aesthetic styles of Republican-era oil painting, a more scientific, reasonable, objective, and professional evaluation basis is established for analyzing the collection market and trends of oil paintings from this era. It is believed that the collection market and trends for Republican-era oil paintings will demonstrate favorable development prospects.

5.1. Xu Beihong oil painting market: Status & Trends

Currently, Xu Beihong has become the "blue-chip stock" of the oil painting market, with multiple works auctioned for over 50 million yuan. Investors regard Xu Beihong's works as low-risk, high-return assets and continue to increase their investment and collection efforts, driving the prices of his oil paintings to soar and setting new auction records for the artist's works. This is because the results from the art collection market have fully demonstrated the optimistic return rate of Xu Beihong's oil paintings. For instance, paintings such as *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* and *Three Knights-Errant in the Wind and Dust* are representative works of classic oil paintings on Chinese historical themes. Today, these figure paintings are regarded as indelible marks in the history of Chinese art and the subjects that best reflect Xu Beihong's lifelong pursuit in painting, making them priceless national treasures. Therefore, whenever a high-quality figure painting by Xu Beihong appears on the market, it is bound to fetch a high price. At the "Oil Painting and Sculpture" of Beijing Hanhai's 2006 Spring Auction, Xu Beihong's oil painting *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, highly anticipated by the industry, sold for 33 million yuan, making it the "highlight" of the spring oil painting auction market that year. This work is a classic from the peak period of Xu Beihong's artistic creation and one of the most brilliant pieces in the history of Chinese oil painting.

5.1.1. Review of early work auctions

The paper-based oil painting *Old Man*, created in 1922, measures only 0.7 square feet. It was auctioned by China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd. in 1995 for 71,500 yuan. *Landscape*, a paper-based oil painting measuring 25cm × 19cm, was auctioned by China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd. in 1995 for 49,500 yuan. *Moonlit Night*, an oil on canvas created in 1935, measures 65cm × 85.5cm (5.1 square feet) and was auctioned by Beijing Huachen Auctions Co., Ltd. in 2004 for 1.155 million yuan. *Sketches of Jiming Temple*, an oil on canvas created in 1948, measures 47.4cm × 65cm (2.8 square feet) and was auctioned by Beijing Huachen Auctions Co., Ltd. in 2002 for 209,000 yuan. *Leaning on the Table*, an oil on canvas created in 1925, measures 59cm × 73cm (3.9 square feet) and was auctioned by China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd. in 2002 for 2.86 million yuan. *Three Knights-Errant in the Wind and Dust*, an oil on canvas created in 1922, measures 87.5cm × 101cm (8 square feet) and was auctioned by Christie's Hong Kong Limited in 2001 for 6.645 million Hong Kong dollars. *Nine Fang Gao*, an oil on canvas created in 1931, measures 65.5cm × 91cm and was auctioned by Shanghai Poly International Auction Co., Ltd. in 2012 for 102 million yuan.



Figure 4: Roman Ruins by Yan Wenliang, oil on canvas, 16cm × 24cm

5.1.2. *Continuous rise in market prices*

It has been proven that Xu Beihong's oil paintings possess immense market value. Since then, they have consistently broken records for the prices of Chinese oil paintings, shattering one myth after another in the art market with astonishing increases. For example, in the 2000 online auction by China Guardian, Xu Beihong's *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* was purchased by a Taiwanese buyer for 2.5 million yuan. Six years later, in the June 2006 spring auction of Beijing Hanhai, when this work reappeared, *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* sold for 33 million yuan after 28 rounds of bidding. Consequently, a "Xu Beihong whirlwind" swept through the domestic and international art markets that year, with his oil paintings repeatedly fetching astronomical prices, and the total transaction value of 10 works exceeding 100 million yuan. Another example is the oil painting *Bath*, which was auctioned at Guangzhou Guardian in 2003 for 5.995 million yuan, while the same painting *Bath* sold for 9.9 million yuan at Beijing Poly's spring auction in 2006. Such returns have delighted investors immensely.

5.1.3. *Subject classification and market characteristics*

From the perspective of subject matter, Xu Beihong's oil painting market exhibits specific trends and characteristics. His oil paintings can broadly be categorized into figure paintings, landscape paintings, and still-life paintings. In terms of thematic selection and symbolism, they can also be classified into historical oil paintings, realistic oil paintings, wartime resistance oil paintings, and sketch-based oil paintings. For instance, Xu Beihong's *Leaning on the Table*, auctioned at China Guardian's autumn auction in 2002, is based on his wife Jiang Biwei and vividly demonstrates Xu Beihong's masterful realist techniques. The background features a table, flowers, books, a flowerpot, and a water cup, all rendered with lifelike naturalism. The fair-skinned girl with rosy cheeks and dark hair gazes quietly at the viewer outside the painting, exuding an elegant demeanor. This painting fetched a high price of 2.86 million yuan as early as 2002.

Another example is *Portrait of Miss Jenny* from the 2005 autumn auction. In the painting, Miss Jenny, dressed in a cheongsam, sits calmly in a rattan chair. Gentle sunlight streams through the window, illuminating her face, which appears serene and poised. Her demeanor is dignified, elegant, and vivid, almost lifelike, fully embodying the gentle and graceful beauty of an Eastern woman. Other works of a similar nature include *Woman with a Garland*, *Piano Lesson*, and *Self-Portrait*, which sold for 1.32 million, 1.65 million, and 2.05 million yuan respectively, receiving considerable attention in the market. However, for a long time, as a master who integrated Chinese and Western techniques, Xu Beihong's oil paintings have been consistently undervalued. Due to the fact that most of Xu Beihong's oil paintings are held in museums and art galleries, with limited circulation in the market, combined with his irreplaceable

contributions as a pioneer, practitioner, and disseminator of Western oil painting in China, his oil paintings still possess significant appreciation potential and strong social purchasing power.

5.1.4. *Analysis of transaction data from 2007 to 2011*

Furthermore, based on the transaction records of Xu Beihong's works from 2007 to 2011, although the number of his oil paintings offered at auction was relatively limited, the transaction rate, transaction prices, and total turnover were all remarkably substantial. Xu Beihong's oil paintings, with their outstanding market prices, have become symbols of exceptional value, thus holding iconic significance. As of 2008, only over 80 of Xu Beihong's oil paintings had entered the auction market, accounting for less than one-tenth of the volume of his Chinese paintings. However, the total turnover approached half of that of his Chinese paintings, exceeding 300 million yuan, with a transaction rate as high as 81%. Among the 11 works that sold for over 10 million yuan, six were oil paintings, with *Put Down Your Whip, Slave and Lion*, *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, and *Portrait of Miss Jenny* ranking as the top four in terms of his personal transaction prices. *Xituo Landscape*, which sold for 13.86 million yuan at Zhejiang Haohan in July 2007, ranked 10th. From these data, it is evident that Xu Beihong's oil paintings hold a significant share in his overall auction offerings. Xu Beihong's works, frequently setting record-breaking prices, dominate the art market, once again proving his immense influence and unparalleled status in modern and contemporary Chinese art history. An analysis of Xu Beihong's auction data reveals a stark contrast between his Chinese paintings and oil paintings. Despite Xu Beihong's high achievements in Chinese painting, particularly in subjects like galloping horses, which are widely recognized by the public, his oil paintings, due to their smaller circulation volume, higher proportion of masterpieces, profound skill, and fewer works created for social obligations, hold a considerably larger market share overall.

5.1.5. Market outlook

In summary, in the auction market, Xu Beihong's works remain a focal point, with prices consistently staying high. The existing achievements fully demonstrate that Xu Beihong's works have a stable and solid foundation for appreciation. As China's economy develops and the local collector base becomes more professional and systematic, Xu Beihong's works are poised for significant further growth. We have every reason to believe that the market prices of Xu Beihong's paintings will continue to perform impressively.

5.2. Lin Fengmian oil painting market: Status & Trends

In recent years, Lin Fengmian's works have frequently appeared at auctions, repeatedly setting new personal transaction price records. Notable auction records for Lin Fengmian's oil paintings include: *The Catch*, sold for 16.34 million Hong Kong dollars, breaking the artist's personal world auction record; *Autumn Mountain Landscape*, sold for 12.19 million yuan; *Peking Opera Characters: Women of the Yang Family—Mu Guiying Takes Command*, sold for 8.42 million Hong Kong dollars; *Mountain Dwelling and Old Conversations*, sold for 5.75 million yuan; *Spring*, sold for 2.875 million yuan; *Riverside Landscape*, sold for 2.3 million yuan; and *Legend of the White Snake*, sold for 2 million yuan.

Lin Fengmian, hailed by academia as a "pioneer in integrating Chinese and Western art," has had a profound influence on the development of modern Chinese art. His oil paintings are rare, as he primarily focused on ink and color painting in his later years. Insiders have revealed that a significant number of Lin Fengmian's oil paintings on the auction market are questionable, particularly those believed to be theatrical figure oil paintings from his later years. His pastel and watercolor works are commonly seen at auctions, while oil paintings are less frequent. Their subjects primarily include beauties, landscapes, figures, still lifes, harvest scenes, and theatrical characters. Masterpieces of harvest scenes and landscape paintings have already reached prices in the tens of millions of yuan.

5.3. Yan Wenliang oil painting market: Status & Trends

Most of Yan Wenliang's oil paintings are housed in the Yan Wenliang Memorial Museum, with only a small number circulating on the market. Over the years, fewer than 30 of his works have been auctioned for over one million yuan, making him the latest recognized master among collectors. It was not until 2005, at Beijing Hanhai's spring auction, that his work first broke the one-million-yuan mark. *Snowy Night*, estimated at 350,000 to 450,000 yuan, sold for 1.43 million yuan. At Christie's Hong Kong autumn auction,

Mountain Stream in the Forest, estimated at 400,000 to 600,000 Hong Kong dollars, sold for 1.14 million Hong Kong dollars. The year 2010 can be considered the "Year of Yan Wenliang." It began with the "Yan Wenliang Art Exhibition," featuring over 60 works, held at the Yanhuang Art Museum, where a series of lectures received enthusiastic responses. This was followed by a peak in auction activity, with eight of his oil paintings selling for over one million yuan each that year. *Sunset on Snow-Covered Landscape*, created in 1947, sold for 3.86 million Hong Kong dollars at Sotheby's Hong Kong. *Poems of Autumn*, painted in 1940, sold for 2.07 million yuan at Beijing Council Auction.

5.4. Liu Haisu Oil Painting Market: Status & Trends

Most of Liu Haisu's oil paintings are housed in the Liu Haisu Art Museum. Among the four masters of oil painting—Xu, Lin, Yan, and Liu—his oil paintings have the smallest circulation volume. Over the years, fewer than 20 of his oil paintings have been auctioned for over one million yuan. As a result, his works have seen the most significant price appreciation in recent years, with a peak occurring between 2009 and 2010. In December 2009, Xiling Yinshe Auction House offered his 1931 works *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Snow Clearing (Luxembourg)*, estimated at 1.2 to 1.8 million yuan. The former set an auction record at 9.072 million yuan, while the latter sold for 8.848 million yuan. The oil painting *Nude*, created in 1931, was sold for 2.86 million yuan by Shanghai Dongfang Auction in December 2004. When it reappeared at Beijing Council Auction in 2010, it sold for 10.752 million yuan. *Waterfall at the Saint-Michel Bridge*, painted in 1934, sold for only 1.912 million Hong Kong dollars at Sotheby's Hong Kong in May 2005, but fetched 5.712 million yuan at Beijing Council Auction in 2010.

6. Conclusion

As time progresses and aesthetic diversity continues to evolve, people's special appreciation and market enthusiasm for classic oil paintings from the Republican period are constantly renewed. Whether in terms of circulation through auction houses and galleries or collections in museums and private hands, these works possess unique artistic resources and market potential. Therefore, in the great journey of the comprehensive rejuvenation of Chinese culture and art, the market for collecting oil paintings from this special period is poised to welcome a new upsurge. This will witness and propel the boundless aesthetic landscape and market revival of China's once-emerging oil painting art, ushering in a vibrant and glorious future for the Republican-era oil painting market.

Examining the multifaceted context of aesthetic appreciation and market collection of oil painting creations from the Republican period, it is evident that Republican-era oil painting undeniably provides profound reflection and infinite inspiration for the contemporary prosperity and development of Chinese oil painting, both academically and commercially. It vividly reflects the aesthetic state of oil painting art during an epoch-making special period. The artistic creations of Republican-era oil painting have laid a foundation and offered insights for the further nationalization and innovation of oil painting in China. With the revival of the era and the flourishing of culture and art, people's aesthetic preferences and collection of oil painting art are expected to present increasingly rich prospects. It is believed that in the future aesthetic landscape, the appreciation and collection of Republican-era oil paintings will yield even more significant artistic and market effects. Republican-era oil painting is destined to become a representative art of its time, integrating into artistic trends, converging into the art market, and being recorded in art history, creating infinite historical and artistic value. Whether in domestic or international art circles, Republican-era oil painting is certain to play an important role in aesthetic appreciation and the art market.

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Figure 5: St. Paul's Church in Venice by Yan Wenliang, oil on canvas, 16cm × 24cm, 1930