



Sanyu's Animals

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If Sanyu struggled with his paintings, he did his best to hide the evidence. The image takes possession of the canvas as if it had simply been waiting for the right moment to manifest itself. In one sense this may be close to what actually happened: one intuitively that in most paintings a long period of reflection preceded the physical work with the brush, bringing to mind the Chinese axiom *yì zài bǐ xiān*: 'the conception precedes the brush'—as indeed was necessary in China, where the surfaces of paper and silk did not allow much reworking. As a procedure transposed to oil painting, this made possible the wonderfully relaxed naturalness that provides Sanyu's works with their unique charm. But it also placed limits on the formal complexities that his painting could accommodate, given how few potential visual relationships can be held together in the mind. This did not trouble the artist overmuch. Having perfected this approach to oil painting as early as 1930, he stayed true to it for the rest of his life.

Yet the approach would not have come so easily to Sanyu, and indeed might never have occurred to him at all, if he had not happened to come to Paris at the particular moment of the late 1920s. The final dissolution of the figure-ground opposition—the great contribution of the modernist masters working before World War I—was already accepted doctrine, yet was such a recent achievement that artists newly arrived in Paris from the rest of Europe, the Americas, and Asia could still participate in the lingering euphoria of its possibilities. For Sanyu those possibilities had a fortuitous resonance with a fundamental characteristic of Chinese ink painting. For more than two thousand years Chinese painters, unburdened by the concept of mimesis, took an inscriptional approach to representational images. There is no figure and ground in Chinese ink painting, only a combined figure-ground continuum in which the ground is generated from the figure and vice versa. This inscriptional quality of the image field of Chinese painting is reinforced

by its formats. Whereas, prior to Modernism, the western framed painting opens a window in the wall, thus encouraging a surface-traversing gaze that abolishes the wall surface, the Chinese hanging scroll with its wide flat mounting encourages a lateral viewing experience that integrates the painting into the wall surface. The screen format goes a step further, turning the painting into its own wall surface. Hand-scrolls and albums similarly encourage lateral viewing, in their case setting up a resonance between the image field of the picture and the surface of the table. Recognizing these practices of inscriptional representation and lateral viewing, one understands better why the compositions of Chinese paintings characteristically present themselves as fragments of a larger visual field, rather than as self-contained structures that defer to the geometry of the frame. All of this was part of Sanyu's birthright, as the son of a sometime ink painter and as someone who had studied calligraphy and ink painting seriously before leaving China. It is understandable, therefore, that upon encountering the dissolution of the figure-ground opposition by cubist and post-impressionist painters in Paris, he visibly found much to make him feel at ease—especially in the art of Matisse and Modigliani and, to a lesser degree, Picasso and Fautrier.

The mutual sympathy of modernist and Chinese practice that informs Sanyu's painting from the outset of his career is marvellously embodied in a work from the beginning of the 1930s, *Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus* (no. 81). Just as the placement of the mirror frame, with the differing relationships of each of its four edges to the corresponding edge of the picture, drains the rectangular frame of its geometric authority, so too the resonating whites of the mirror, the statuette, the mantelpiece and the wall close off any deep space to optical penetration. The painting is all surface, but a surface that has its own internal depth in which the ideographic image dialogues with the physical mark. This dialogue that is the core of his practice is only as successful—as vital—as the sense of event

that the painting creates. There are two resonating events in Sanyu's painting—the performance of the painting's execution and the experience that is represented. Although it was part of his purpose to lead the viewer to associate the two, Sanyu was too intelligent a painter to think he could do so simply by conflating them in his own practice. Certainly, parts of his paintings record a performance in real time—in this painting the upper part of the statue and its mirror reflection, the inscribed pattern of the mirror frame. But other parts—notably the whites—have clearly been worked up more slowly in order to bridge the distance between the real time of performance and the constructed representational effect of real time. Nowhere, however, does he advertise the labour of painting, a feature that has aesthetic and philosophical implications to be sure, but is also a matter of social attitude: like the man, the painter was a marvellous snob.

These various aspects of his working procedures cannot be dissociated from a central characteristic of his art, its lyric impulse—lyric in the sense of visualizing a poetics of personal experience. This was a poetics for which the poetry and painting of the Chinese literati had prepared him, and for which modernist painting offered new possibilities of technique and form. Sanyu was not alone in his generation of Chinese artists born in the years either side of 1900 in associating the poetics of personal experience with modernist techniques. His friend Pang Xunqin (1906–85) followed the same path, and he also has kindred spirits both among the modernist-trained Chinese artists who returned to ink painting in the 1940s (Zhu Qizhan, 1892–1996), and among others who committed themselves to design (Qian Juntao, b. 1906). Unique to Sanyu, however, is the dandyish hedonism that gives his art its special combination of intense involvement and cool affect.

So strongly did this guide him that from the beginning of his Paris career he seems to have felt no fear at all in the face of the established but—to a Chinese painter of the period—potentially discomfiting genre of the female nude, which was to become one of his four preferred subjects. Sanyu's nudes are contemplated sensuously and intimately, yet are simultaneously distanced by a monumental and ideographic conception of the figure. The early examples from the late 1920s and '30s sit comfortably in the world of unproblematic sensuality and chic that was one aspect of the *retour à l'ordre* after World War I. Their contours are

a caress. In contrast, the nudes he painted after World War II are poster-like in their blunt linear economy and immediacy, invoking the mass-market glamour of post-war advertising and cinema. The effortless draughtsmanship on display in Sanyu's numerous surviving drawings and sketches from the 1930s highlights the emphasis on simplification that led to the memorable silhouettes of the paintings.

The fusion of hedonism with cool affect plays out differently in the second of the subjects in which he specialized. This for convenience's sake we may call the still life, though it is actually a more narrowly defined genre in its iconic focus on a single, more or less centrally placed, composite object: a bowl of fruit, a marriage bouquet in a glass jar, a glass jar of goldfish, or—most often—flowers, whether in a vase, a basket, or a pot. Unlike the female nude, which had no Chinese counterpart, the still life in this form converges with a long Chinese tradition of depicting vases or baskets of flowers. The homeland connection is made all the more compelling by his choice of flowers, dominated by chrysanthemums, peonies, lotuses, and plum blossom. Sanyu's paintings of this kind from the 1930s, so evocative of domesticity, whim, and quotidian celebration, are at the same time curiously formal; they manage the balancing act of inviting us nonchalantly into a life, only to reveal themselves as icons of decorum. Later in his career, during the post-war years, the mood turns darker, the invitation becomes double-edged. The forms become angular, the line blunt, the colour uningratiating and at times harsh; the compositions bring into play the edges of the canvas, creating an image field whose address to the viewer is strikingly direct. One has the impression of an artist hiding increasingly behind an accessible stylishness—an observation that applies equally to his later nudes.

Sanyu's nudes and still lives are discussed at length by other contributors to this catalogue. In this short essay I shall focus largely on a third favourite subject of the artist—animals—before addressing in conclusion a late interest in nature themes that developed out of the animal paintings and was truncated by the artist's untimely death.

It seems appropriate that Sanyu had a passion for animals, which are so engaging and sensuous yet remain ultimately unknowable and separate (the evidence of the nudes is that he saw women in similar terms, as belonging to a different species from him). He painted animals all his life—principally pets, an-

imals remembered from home, and exotic zoo creatures.¹ He portrayed them alone, integrated them into still lifes, and placed them in landscapes. In addition, his early paintings sometimes include meta-representations of animals, usually in the form of Chinese textile designs; they thereby enter the privacy of the studio and the bedroom (White Nude [no. 23], Nude on a Carpet [no. 37]). During the war, from 1942 to 1944, when painting materials were in short supply and in any event too expensive, the plaster sculptures he made were depictions of animals. Although the explanation of this enduring passion may ultimately lie in the man's temperament, it surely had childhood origins that must be related partly to the fact that his father was a painter of animals, especially lions and horses.

Horses, in fact, were Sanyu's single most important animal theme. Horse paintings constitute one of the most ancient Chinese genres, with a history that can be traced back to the seventh century. The entire span of this history has remained relevant into modern times: for the Chinese horse painter, compositional types developed in the remote past are as relevant as anything more recent. The enduring appeal of horse painting lies in the accumulated metaphoric density of the genre which allows an artist to push it in a political, social, or personal direction or even to overlay meanings of different kinds. In one group of paintings from the 1930s Sanyu unmistakably drew upon this Chinese tradition, taking his cue from a sub-genre in which unsaddled horses are shown at play. In such paintings the stances of the animals are typically highly codified. For Horses in a Green Landscape (fig. 2) of 1931 Sanyu stayed within the confines of the genre; for Six Horses (no. 62), on the other hand, which filters the Chinese genre through Matisse's *La Danse*, he adopted and adapted three of the traditional stances—grazing, reclining, and rolling on the ground—and added two new ones: rearing and leaping.² The reference point of *La Danse* is wholly appropriate to a pictorial subject that in China was first and foremost an evocation of freedom—in metaphorical terms, usually the freedom of withdrawal from public service, though for the emigré Sanyu it is more likely to have evoked freedom from the constraints of Chinese society. It is all the more interesting, then, that the idea of internalized constraint is separately explored in a second group of horse paintings that are also China-related. These depict circus horses, and derive from his memories of a travelling horse circus from Beijing

which Sanyu had seen as a child in Sichuan. The circus paintings (perhaps suggested to him by the importance of the circus theme in modern European art) stand at the opposite pole from Six Horses: they highlight the trained, unnatural stances of the bridled horse that on command kneels, rears, stretches out a leg, reclines like a woman, or interlocks its head with another horse (Kneeling Horse [fig. 3], Peking Circus, Two Horses on a Carpet [no. 61]). But the issue of freedom versus constraint is not necessarily related to his feelings about Chinese society; Sanyu was, after all, famously ambivalent about his career as a painter, and it may also be relevant that, after the first few years of relative financial comfort, he often had to turn his talents as a painter to furniture decoration in order to support himself. One can also relate his interest in this issue to the fact that his practice of painting aimed at a performance that ideally would seem completely free and unconstrained.

Less speculatively, the theme of horses, like his many other China-related themes, offered him the opportunity to explore questions of cultural identity and belonging. Sanyu unabashedly advertised his attachment to certain aspects of a Chinese identity by including in many of his paintings such recognizably Chinese elements as writing, textile designs, ceramics, textiles, flowers, plants, animals and even women. Whereas in the hands of another artist these references might have descended into simple nostalgia and chinoiserie, Sanyu's detachment instead gives all such motifs a matter-of-fact presence. This matter-of-factness embodies an assumption that, far from being exotica, such motifs had a natural right to present themselves within a pictorial space that reads first and foremost as modern and western—even if, as I have suggested, that space is not in fact as western as it looks. It is relevant here that Sanyu defined his cultural style—his particular cosmopolitanism—in the years around 1930 when China, along with India and Japan, was one of the few non-western cultures to escape the deprecating attitudes associated with French colonialism. Sanyu was certainly aware of the exoticism that was inevitably projected on his work, and was not above taking advantage of it. However, the evidence of the work itself is that he neither fully internalized that exoticism in his painting nor felt the need to render it problematical. Thus there is no contradiction in the fact that the Chinese horses in these pictures, which are also horses taken from memory, take form within

a image field that belongs to a visibly Parisian and more modern world. Indeed, Sanyu seems to have seen in modernism the possibility of dissolving any contradiction between a Chinese and a Parisian identity, with Paris here standing for the most up-to-date western culture. There is a striking contrast here between Sanyu and his younger and more ambitious contemporary, Zao Wou-Ki. Arriving in Paris in 1948, Zao soon took the measure of the internationalization of the art world in the post-war period and its re-centring around a normative practice of abstraction that imposed the myth of a geocultural universality. Zao quickly eliminated visible Chinese signs from his work, displacing his Chineseness into the improvisatory event of the painting. Sanyu on the other hand, as the product of an earlier and more authentically cosmopolitan era, was able to embrace cosmopolitanism as heterogeneity without fear of either losing his Chinese identity or being marginalized because of it.

Exoticism is directly engaged by Sanyu in his many paintings of zoo animals, which are always shown free and in the wild, though it is the wild of his imagination that is represented rather than any habitat specific to zebras, leopards, tigers, giraffes, deer, elephants, snakes, hawks or eagles. 'Exotic to whom?' is the question one must ask. During the years of Sanyu's childhood and youth, exotic animals were still a relatively new and rarely encountered element in Chinese life. Certainly there were rural areas where a few of the animals he painted could be seen, but growing up in Nanchong he is unlikely to have had the chance to see them in the wild. More relevant is the Chinese awareness of animals in the rest of the world, including zebras, giraffes, and elephants, through printed images. Introduced by missionaries in the late nineteenth century, these images were almost immediately pirated and reworked by Chinese artists and given more widespread circulation. In Shanghai, where he sojourned in 1920, exotic animals were put on display in commercial settings as early as the late nineteenth century. Sanyu would also have had the opportunity to visit the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo in 1918–19. At the beginning of the twentieth century in East Asia, exotic animals had modern connotations, partly because it was modernity that had created the awareness of them, and partly because they evoked the idea of travel to other parts of the world. As late as the 1930s, zebras and giraffes appear in ink paintings, in addition to the relatively common lions and tigers with their nationalist con-

notations. One cannot assume, therefore, that the significance of exotic animals in Sanyu's Parisian paintings is related wholly to the exoticism of his own person as a Chinese in Paris. Although this latter line of interpretation is supported by the fact that, at times, he encouraged viewers to interpret certain animals in his paintings as self-images, it is likely that the modern connotations of the exotic animal in China played an equally important role in this choice of subject.

If Sanyu's art is structured around a dialogue between the ideographic image and the physical mark, the dialogue passes by way of an intense attention to the physicality of his subjects. This is not, however, a physicality of mass or volume displaced, but one of gesture and stance; in this regard, Sanyu is entirely true to Chinese understanding of the world as being made up of infinitely varied structures of energy. Part of the appeal of exotic animals (as of horses) must have been the chance they presented to Sanyu to explore particular possibilities of this movement-oriented physicality. In the earlier part of his career, his attention went primarily to the image of the animal itself, which, by means of a combination of rhythmic line, a carefully calculated silhouette, and unexpected postures, took on a gravity-defying weightlessness. In several paintings from the 1930s he reinforced the effect by using pale lines on a dark background, so that the image appears to be transparent; but he later eschewed this rather literal device (Leopard [no. 69]).³ In the 1940s came a shift as he turned his attention to the landscape possibilities of what had been a purely abstract ground. By the suggestion of a horizon line or some ambiguously defined topographic feature, his animals—now radically scaled down—became the inhabitants of a much larger environment. As Sanyu became more comfortable with this new mode, explicitly rendered trees, mountains, and skies made their appearance (Tiger, Two Horses in a Red Landscape [no. 98]). In the process, these animal-in-landscape paintings become increasingly reminiscent of Indian miniatures, not only in their colours and space but also in their fusion of the narrative vignette with a complete natural world (Leopards at Night [fig. 3], Cat and Crow [no. 95]). A dialogue always exists between the physicality of the silhouetted animals—each one a condensed crystallization of movement—and that of the landscape, which takes on its own rhythmic character. In their simplest form the landscape features pull the eye hither and thither across the sur-

face in a supple horizontal play of elastic topography that tends to echo and amplify the postures of the animals (Eagle [no. 94]). In the (later?) 1950s Sanyu introduced a centrally placed tree, whose cut-off trunk imposes a perceptual closeness that contradicts the distance implied by the small scale of the animals. The dialogue survives, however, with a leopard tail, for example, echoing the turn of a branch (Leopard in a Tree [fig. 4]). In other paintings of the period, the animals are depicted in motion, taking the eye on a journey in which we quickly become aware that the landscape separately embodies its own potential journey for the eye (Giraffes [no. 97]).

Once the animals entered a landscape environment, the emotional tone started to shift along with the scale. By the 1950s Sanyu had moved almost entirely away from his earlier interest in veillings of colour and a restricted, restrained palette, the combination of which created a lightness reminiscent of ink painting. More saturated colours appeared, in a wider range of combinations. Typically, he set small areas of very bright colour against minor-key colours and either black or another dark hue. These late paintings take on a more substantial presence than the pre-war works, each with its own nuance of mood deriving in large part from the interplay of the sombre and the light-hearted. The thematic context varies. Solitude predominates—though a strangely jaunty solitude that bespeaks self-sufficiency (Elephant [fig. 5]). Other compositions feature two animals, sometimes of the same species, sometimes not; they may be in physical contact or separated by a distinct distance, but the sense of intimacy between them is always strong (Gallop-ing Horses [no. 99]). In the very few paintings of groups of animals—zebras heading for the horizon, giraffes hurtling gawkily around a park (?)—they appear to be in unexplained flight (Zebras [no. 96], Giraffes).

Finally, animals were also at certain periods a constant presence in Sanyu's life, appearing in paintings both early and late. The early examples portray cats and Pekinese dogs, in each case a single animal; images of domesticity, these do not go much beyond the charming. It was only later in his life, during the 1950s, that cats, in particular, found their own special place as protagonists in Sanyu's by then darker pictorial world, in a series of still lifes depicting potted plants into which the cat interjects an element of disturbance as it variously hunts butterflies and birds. In

the undated 1950s painting *Cat and Birds* (fig. 1, p. 22), Sanyu imagines a bird's nest in a potted plant stripped of its flowers and most of its leaves; the nest is not empty—chicks are being fed by one of their parents. The cat below, standing on the rim of the plant pot, strains its neck toward the nest. The mood is hard to pin down. The black-outlined branches of the plant sink into the dark greenish-brown background, their sombre tones echoing the ominous tone of the event. Yet the patterned whites that link the table cloth, plant pot, cat, nest, and bird seem somehow hopeful. The impossible scene might tentatively be described as a sardonic fantasy, and is possibly a metaphor for a precariousness of existence that Sanyu knew well. *Glad-ioli and Cat* (fig. 6), undated but probably from the 1960s, displays the same dark humour. The cat, a surrogate for the artist in his compositional efforts, reaches out to threaten the stability of the solidly placed glass vase of flowers. The jagged rhythms of the forms replicate the tension structurally, and the notably cool colour scheme does nothing to reassure.

As a postscript to this brief discussion of Sanyu's animal paintings, it is appropriate to comment on a small group of nature depictions that seem to have developed out of his engagement with landscape environments for animals. These works all date from the 1950s and '60s—perhaps even from the late 1950s onwards. They represent one of the ways in which, towards the end of his life, Sanyu's art was evolving once again. Prior to World War II, Sanyu's pictorial world very largely respected the implied parameters of confined spaces—apartments, zoo cages, and circus tents. Paintings such as *Ducks and Boat* (fig. 7), with its memory of a rural Sichuan scene, or *Sparrows on a Line* with its urban view from an apartment window, are atypical in every way. Similarly, his three copper-plate landscape engravings from 1930 illustrating a French translation of poems by Tao Qian (365–427) have little connection to his painting and had no sequel. One might reasonably object that his early paintings of deer, zebras, and leopards imply an exterior space; but this is to forget that he encountered them as zoo animals, and in any event their environment is left unspecified. The only true exceptions to the rule are his paintings of horses at play, where there is often a rudimentary suggestion of landscape. The first signs of a more systematic expansion of Sanyu's pictorial world beyond confined spaces come in the 1940s, though it is unclear whether it happened during the

war or immediately after. This is the point at which he diminished the scale of his other animal subjects so that they, too, could be placed within a landscape environment. In a few paintings he extended this logic to his female nudes, whom we see in one case lying on the beach (*Two Nudes on the Beach* [no. 44]). However, it was not until a later moment that nature began to interest him as a subject in its own right.

Some of the late nature depictions are landscapes proper, in which animal protagonists are replaced by natural ones—the moon or trees. *Crescent Moon* (no. 100), *Night Colours* (no. 101), and *Branches* (fig. 8) all take the moodiness of the animal paintings to an extreme. The red-haloed moon of *Night Colours*, it should be noted, also appears in a rare 1960s landscape, *Nude under the Moon* (no. 45), that places a female nude under a night sky. A separate but parallel, and likely contemporary, series takes what was an old subject for Sanyu—branches of flowering prunus—and displaces it from the domestic context of the still life into the world of landscape. *Prunus Branches in a Green Landscape* (fig. 9), like the above mentioned *Branches*, is one of several nature paintings in which Sanyu explores the formal trope of a screen-like structure of branches, leaves, or stems that carries the eye across and around the picture surface. Here the white and red blossoms, and the tender yellow leaves, are the real protagonists of the painting, contending with the ominously dark branches on which they depend. The tight, tense web of branches dialogues with the easy, swinging brushstrokes of the upper part of the green ground, and with a favourite forked lateral landscape form below. The displacement of flowers from domestic interiors into nature can also be seen in Sanyu's late depictions of lotus ponds, which share the graphic immediacy of the prunus paintings. The mood here shifts radically, reminding us that in China plum blossoms and lotuses had very different emotional connotations, one speaking most often to the sur-

vival of hardship, the other—though its meanings are many—to a sensual engagement with life.

Particularly noteworthy is a Six-Panel Screen with Lotus Motif (no. 93), in which the dark ground is figured by long vertical brushstrokes that manage, despite the very different type of brush that is involved, to suggest the visual presence of the Chinese calligraphic brush-trace with its dynamic interaction of ink and paper. Contrasted with the lotuses it helps to give their pale yellow leaves a gilded luxury.⁴ Similar brushwork appears in *Bamboos* (fig. 10), a work that presents the screen-like coverage of the picture surface at its starkest. It occurs in a different form in a series of paintings of goldfish (already present in the lotus paintings), probably all dating from the 1960s, where his subject is as much water as it is the fish (*Fishes* [fig. 11], *Two Fishes, Carps*). Effects of transparency that Sanyu had largely dropped in recent years here find a new place in combination with intense colour. The gestural effect and sense of flow again recall ink painting, including the splashed-ink paintings of Zhang Daqian that were exhibited in Paris in 1963, but they also represent a pre-war figurative painter's acknowledgment of post-war abstractionist innovations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like his great predecessor Bada Shanren (1626–1705), Sanyu found his path early, and in the process of reinventing himself never fundamentally changed direction. All his life he remained committed to a dialogue between the ideographic image and the mark, in which he avoided any sign of laboriousness. Resolutely hedonistic and engaging on one level, on another his dandyish art never dropped its detachment and reserve. A cosmopolitan from first to last, Sanyu never felt the need to conceal his Chinese sensibility, taking the heterogeneity of his identity as given. His is the rare practice of painting that approaches visualization of a truly intercultural belonging, for few artists have been so comfortable in their attachment to the in-between.

¹ One animal remembered from home that is not discussed below is the water buffalo, depicted in a work of the 1940s or '50s, *Water Buffalo*.

² Note that the head of a pigeon is figured in neg-

ative in the void between the overlapping prancing and grazing horses.

³ The idea of a painted-out motif survives, however, in the incorporation into certain later compositions, such as *Leopards at Night*.

⁴ Both on stylistic grounds and on the grounds of this general pattern in Sanyu's development, I doubt that *Lotus*, dated in the *catalogue raisonné* to the 1940s or 1950s, could, in fact, be as early as the 1940s.