

The Embodiment of Modernity in Sanyu's Works

Manifestasi Kemodenan dalam Karya Sanyu

Zhang Ran¹, Wan Samiati Andriana Binti W.Mohamad Daud^{2*}, Liu Jingrou³

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor Darul Ehsan, 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia; School of Fashion Media, Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology, Lihu Middle Avenue, Xiangtang Economic Development Zone, Jiangxi Province, 330201 Nanchang City, China

² College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor Darul Ehsan, 40450 Shah Alam, Malaysia

³ School of Fashion Media, Jiangxi Institute of Fashion Technology, Lihu Middle Avenue, Xiangtang Economic Development Zone, Jiangxi Province, 330201 Nanchang City, China.

*Corresponding author email: samiati@uitm.edu.my

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 10th December 2025

Revised: 10th Mac 2026

Accepted: 23rd April 2026

Published: 27th April 2026

KEYWORDS

Sanyu

Artistic Modernity

Chinese Literati Aesthetics

Fusion of East and West

Cross-cultural Identity

Global Modern Art

ABSTRACT - This paper investigates the embodiment of artistic modernity in the works of Sanyu, a Chinese artist who lived and worked in France during the early twentieth century. As one of the earliest Chinese painters to engage with Western modernism, Sanyu developed a unique visual language that merged the poetic spirit of Chinese literati aesthetics with the expressive vitality of European art. The study aims to reveal how his artistic modernity was constructed through both cultural negotiation and individual creativity. Employing a qualitative, interpretive methodology, this research combines literature review, comparative visual analysis, iconographic study, and contextual interpretation. Selected works from Sanyu's "Pink Period" to his late Paris years are analysed in terms of composition, line, colour, and symbolism to understand how he redefined the boundaries between East and West, tradition and innovation. Drawing upon Baudelaire's notion of modernity as a dialectic between the transient and the eternal, the study interprets Sanyu's art as a visual articulation of temporal consciousness, emotional authenticity, and cross-cultural identity. The findings demonstrate that Sanyu's artistic practice transcends stylistic imitation, transforming the techniques of both Chinese and Western traditions into a poetic and spiritual synthesis. His works embody modernity not merely as a formal pursuit of the new but as an existential reflection on the self within cultural hybridity. The study concludes that Sanyu's art contributes to a broader understanding of global modernity by illustrating how non-Western artists reinterpreted modernism as a plural and evolving phenomenon. His legacy provides an alternative vision of twentieth-century art that celebrates dialogue, transformation, and creative freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

At the turn of the twentieth century, as industrial modernity reshaped societies and cultures across the globe, artistic practices confronted unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The end of the Second Industrial Revolution marked a transformative period, where scientific and technological advancements radically altered traditional social structures and ways of life. As human beings gained unprecedented control over nature, art was forced to evolve, shedding its passive, nature-representative role to become a medium of active innovation and self-expression. The rise of modernist movements, including Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Neo-Impressionism, further catalyzed a diversification of artistic practices, giving rise to new schools such as Fauvism, Cubism, and Expressionism.

During this period of global transformation, China found itself in a phase of transition between traditional and modern ideologies. The education sector, influenced by the rapid spread of Western ideas, called for Chinese youth to embrace advanced Western art and culture. Sanyu responded to this call by embarking on a journey to study in France. Born in China in 1901, Sanyu (October 1901 – August 1966) became one of the most prominent Chinese artists in France. Deeply influenced by the modernist wave in France, his works represent a synthesis of Chinese tradition and Western modernism. His unique style not only contributed to the interaction and exchange between Eastern and Western art but also played a pivotal role in the development of Chinese modern art. Sanyu's art holds a significant place in the French art scene and had a profound, albeit indirect, influence on the trajectory of modern art in China.

Literature Review

Sanyu, a leading figure among Chinese artists who studied abroad in the early twentieth century, spent the majority of his artistic career in Paris. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sanyu developed a distinctive personal style that set him apart from other Chinese artists of the time. However, for various historical reasons, this artist—whose life and work unfolded in the West—was long overlooked. Only in recent years, as scholars have revisited the era of cultural exchange between China and the West, has Sanyu gained significant recognition, with an increasing number of research papers and monographs devoted to his life and art.

In mainland China, research on Sanyu has been somewhat limited, with early contributions coming from memoirs and historical accounts, such as Wu Guanzhong's *Wu Guanzhong Speaks of Sanyu* and Xu Zhimo's *Scales and Claws of Paris*. Gu Yue's *Sanyu (2007)* and his doctoral dissertation *Sanyu's Art Research—And the Modernity of Chinese Art* provide a more in-depth examination of Sanyu's life and art in France, offering a comprehensive analysis of his artistic development.

In recent years, scholars have focused on various aspects of Sanyu's work, such as his artistic style, the reasons behind his relative obscurity, and the Oriental elements within his paintings. Chen Yanfeng, a PhD graduate from the University of Paris, authored *Selected Artworks of Chinese Descent (1) Sanyu (1995)*, which was among the first to introduce Sanyu's biography and art in a comprehensive manner. The *Complete Works of Sanyu's Oil Paintings (2001)* compiled by Yi Shufan further contributed to the scholarship by addressing gaps in the historical records and providing a more thorough account of Sanyu's oeuvre.

Internationally, Sanyu's work has received significant attention, particularly in France. Art historian Jean-Claude Riedel's article *The Nude Women of Sanyu* focused on Sanyu's distinctive portrayal of the female nude. Similarly, Droz's *Sanyu - The Writing of the Body* (early 21st century) offered a comprehensive reflection on Sanyu's influence in Paris and the West. These studies emphasize Sanyu's role as an outstanding Eastern artist whose work bridged cultural divides and resonated with Western modernist ideals. In the United States, Leslie Jones's *Sanyu - A Chinese Painter in Montparnasse* analyzed Sanyu's life and creative journey in Paris, contributing to a broader understanding of his status as a transnational artist.

Despite the wealth of research on Sanyu, most of the studies focus on the interpretation of his artistic style and his role as a bridge between Eastern and Western art. These works, though varied in their approaches and value judgments, provide invaluable insights into Sanyu's contributions to modern art.

However, they often fail to systematically analyze his works through the lens of modernity. This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the concept of artistic modernity, exploring how Sanyu fused traditional Eastern and modern Western artistic elements to create a unique artistic language. In doing so, it aims to enrich the scholarship on Sanyu and contribute to the broader discourse on the development of modern art in the early twentieth century.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine the embodiment of modernity in Sanyu's art. The research integrates three complementary methods: literature review, comparative visual analysis, and contextual interpretation. The literature review provides the theoretical foundation, engaging with scholarship on modernity, cross-cultural aesthetics, and Sanyu's artistic legacy.

The comparative visual analysis focuses on selected paintings from Sanyu's early "Pink Period" to his late Paris years. Through the study of form, line, colour, and spatial arrangement, the analysis identifies the ways in which Sanyu reinterpreted Chinese literati aesthetics within Western modernist frameworks.

The contextual interpretation situates Sanyu's artistic practice within the broader socio-cultural and intellectual background of early twentieth-century modernism. Baudelaire's concept of modernity—emphasizing the coexistence of the transient and the eternal—serves as the interpretive lens for understanding how Sanyu negotiated between tradition and innovation.

Furthermore, the study employs iconographic analysis to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in his depictions of figures, animals, and still life. This approach links visual form to philosophical and cultural significance, allowing a deeper reading of his visual language.

By synthesizing formal, cultural, and philosophical perspectives, this methodology enables a comprehensive exploration of how Sanyu's art transcends stylistic boundaries and articulates the complex dimensions of artistic modernity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Modernity

The concept of modernity is a central theme in the study of art, especially in the context of aesthetics, where its manifestation reflects a transformation of cultural and artistic values. While the term "modernity" is often associated with Baudelaire (1821–1867), a pioneering figure in Western modern literature, it is worth noting that the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language traces the first recorded use of the term to 1672. This suggests that the term has been in circulation in England since the 17th century. However, Baudelaire's formulation of modernity, as seen in his work *The Painter of Modern Life*, has had a more profound influence on the development of modern thought. For Baudelaire, modernity refers not simply to a temporal concept or historical period but to an attitude of engagement with the present moment, focusing on the ephemeral, the transient, and the unique qualities that define a specific time.

Baudelaire defines modernity as "presentness," which is the distinctive nature or essence of things and people as they exist in their own time. This is evident in the way subjects in portraiture from different periods are depicted wearing the fashionable attire of their era. For Baudelaire, even ancient painters exhibited a kind of modernity by capturing the zeitgeist of their time. He famously stated, "Modernity is transition, ephemeral, accidental; that is half of art, the other half is eternal and unchanging" (Claire, J., & Guo, 2012). From this, it is clear that Baudelaire's concept of modernity transcends time as a historical period. It is not simply a chronologically defined era but a continuous process of change and self-reinvention, emphasizing the "new" over the "eternal."

Baudelaire's insight reveals modernity as a dynamic, self-perpetuating force that continually seeks novelty and difference. This drive for constant innovation leads to a paradox: modernity, in its pursuit of newness, ultimately rebels against itself. However, this pioneering spirit should not be equated with modernity itself. The avant-garde, as an expression of this rebellious attitude, is a distortion of modernity

that ignores the "eternal and unchanging" aspects of art, replacing the finite with the infinite. The vanguard thus transcends and absorbs modernity, ultimately consuming it. This tension between the pursuit of the new and the acknowledgment of the eternal has contributed to the emergence of the term "post-modernity," which is often associated with art that reflects repetition, excess, or artifice—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "late modernity."

In this context, Sanyu's approach to modernity stands out as both a respect for and a critical engagement with this concept. As a modern artist, Sanyu demonstrated both a critical and independent consciousness, often distancing himself from the mainstream cultural currents of his time. Influenced perhaps by the rebellious ethos of figures like Duchamp and Picasso—whose works questioned traditional notions of art—Sanyu developed an aesthetic of survival that resisted conformity. He was a defender of traditional art in terms of aesthetics, yet he also embraced a modern sensibility that was shaped by an individualistic and rebellious spirit.

This dual rebelliousness—rooted in both tradition and modernity—set Sanyu apart from his contemporaries. His works reflect a profound tension between respecting classical forms and pushing beyond them, creating a unique space where he both preserved and reinvented traditional Chinese art in a modern context. Sanyu's sense of optimism in the face of his lack of recognition can be seen as a manifestation of his confidence in his own modernity. He understood that those who are truly "awakened" often possess values that transcend their time, allowing them to create art that resonates beyond the constraints of their era.

The Quality of Modernity in Sanyu's Art

As one of the early batch of painters who stayed in France in the twentieth century, Sanyu, driven by his free soul, stayed away from the strict and regimented academy education, and chose the non-academic education which is open and full of freedom. In his creative process, Sanyu injected his own emotions, showing a unique, blended artistic style, which is mainly embodied in the choice between tradition and modernity. The value of Sanyu's artworks reflects centrally the potential connection between Chinese and Western cultures, which is a kind of cultural inheritance that can't be isolated from the continuity of modernity.

Unique artistic language - poetic language

To Catch the Spirit with the Shape

Ancient art in China has a tradition of focusing on 'Root in Feeling' and light imitation, and the unique and vigorous vitality of Chinese poetry and painting lies in the writing of God in form, and resemblance is not the goal of Chinese art to pursue, but resemblance is the secret treasure of Oriental art to reach a better state. It can also be said that the organic unity of form and spirit is a necessary condition for the emergence of poetic language in painting, and this concept has become the core concept of literati painting since the Song Dynasty, where art is not burdened by appearance and is not confined to specific forms, but borrows the shape of the object to convey the painter's meaning.

Unlike Chinese art, which uses form to write God, Western art, such as painting, is more dedicated to the pursuit of nature, with a strong emphasis on resemblance, thus creating two different art systems. However, Sanyu skilfully fused and transformed the differences between the two, forming the 'Sanyu Style', which is both Western in expression and Eastern in flavour. Having long been imbued with the traditional art of the literati, Sanyu puts his 'poetic feelings' into his lines, depicting objects in a generalised manner, and drawing modern paintings with poetic language.

Take *Horse with Crossed Necks*, for example (e.g. Figure 1), a painting from Sanyu's 'pink period' (1921-1941). Sanyu's love of horses was influenced by his father and also by his first wife, Marsu (whom Sanyu often called Ma). Many of Sanyu's works feature horses, standing, lying, reclining, or running, in a variety of shapes. Most of the horses in Sanyu's paintings are well-behaved and docile, and this painting, 'Cross-necked Horse' is no exception. The modelling that does not stick to resemblance appears to be more vivid and lovely, with two brushstrokes over the mane, the tail painted in calligraphy, and two points of black symmetrically echoed left and right, which is properly handled and playful. The whole outline is rounded, not hard, and the intersection of the necks is right in the middle of the canvas, balancing the picture and expressing an attitude of equality. Sanyu specialises in using horses as a metaphor for

people. The left horse's front legs are slightly raised, as if to convey a message, increasing interaction without making the composition dull. The two horses stand one in front of the other, and the ground is decorated with a coin pattern, which, against the pink background, shows a strong sense of love, as if in a beautiful dream, pure and full of hope for life. It is this kind of shape to write God, like and not like, in order to form a vivid charm, in order to the true feelings of the heart perfectly presented to the audience.



Figure.1 Sanyu, Cross-necked horse

3.2.1.2 Fictitious and realistic comparison

China's ancient art paid attention to the combination of the Real and the Visionary, that is, the creation of works of art to focus on the painting of specific objects, but also to focus on the painting of the insubstantial scene, the Visionary and the Real is the soul of China's painting art. The composition of Chinese painting follows the art principle of being subtle, inward-looking and inclusive, with curving and stretching, hidden and present, creating a wonderful and hazy mood of reality within reality and emptiness within reality. The beauty of the real scene is born through the imaginary scene, which does not only refer to the blank space not painted, but also contains a richer form of expression. The imaginary scene gives us more space in imagination, and this art form enriches the aesthetics of our nation and promotes the birth of new moods in artistic creation. Take Zhu Da's 'Fish and Stone', a calligraphy and painting master in the late Ming Dynasty, as an example: a piece of strange stone, a fish, the ink and brushwork is pale and rounded, the brushwork is concise, a few strokes, and the expression is all there. No one will think that the fish is in the air because there is no ripple in the painting, although the water is not painted, but it has already filled up the space of the painting, no longer needing specific objects and landscapes to be represented, the space is standing there, no need to fill it up with physical objects, and it has already spread beyond the painting (e.g. Figure 2).



Figure.2 Zhu Da, Fish and Stone



Figure.3 Sanyu, Naked Woman

Lao Tzu said:

“Everything under the sun is born from existence, and existence is born from nothing.”

Without the ‘blank’ nothing, the ‘ink’ something cannot be produced. In his creations, Sanyu always pursues the unity of the actual scene and the ethereal scene, fully embodying the concept of the birth of the real and the imaginary. Taking the nude woman as an example, the first one is the early combination of ink and watercolour ‘Nude Woman Sketching’ (e.g. Figure 3), the combination of reality and emptiness is reflected in this painting in four aspects:

Firstly, modelling, which is the most obvious: the woman sits with her back to us, her upper body tilted to the right, her centre of gravity leaning to the right, her right hand propped up on the ground as a pivot point, her right leg curled inward, and her knee linked to her left foot to form a line, which doesn't show her foot jumping, although her left leg is not shown, but the left leg is not shown. Although the left leg is not drawn, it is not missing in the viewer's consciousness, and it is presented in a bent backward posture, which is a typical treatment of the peeping tom. Sanyu breaks the stereotype of painting objects in the past, and adopts this spatial expression method, which adds to the interest of the picture.

Secondly, space: the picture as a whole is a back nude woman, and its counterpart is the line in the middle of the picture, the nude woman's reality, combined with the line's emptiness, although the ground and the wall are only separated by a line, but it is enough to account for the position of the model, and the space is standing there;

Thirdly, lines: Sanyu's calligraphy into the painting, outlining the shape of the human body, fluent and easy to use, and joints interspersed with in place to write the God in the shape of the God. The left side of the silhouette line is varied, the line from the shoulder to the hip from thick to thin, from deep to shallow, although it is a cross between two lines, but the articulation is just right. This combination of solid and void is also applied to the right leg, where the line between the hip and the ground is broken but still connected, with changes in the void, which is the result of the relationship between black and white and the movement of the breath. An arm's length away from the centre, the right knee is outlined in solid strokes with a sense of rhythm. Such a slow rhythm of a virtual and a real, giving people a sense of calm and relaxation.

Fourth, colour: this period of Sanyu works have a three-dimensional concept, the body with watercolour filling colours, seemingly scribbling with a brush, without thinking, but in fact is the result of Mr. inner management. Deep is false, shallow is false, the nude woman's back left and right real and false combined to account for the light and shadow, the arm of the same reason, presenting a real living flesh.

As Du Dakai said:

“Sanyu's poetic character proves that the significance of literature for art is not absolutely silent. Poetry, as a basic feature of Chinese culture, can still be extended to the process of modern art; Sanyu, as a Chinese artist, can't avoid carrying the influence of his national culture, which is tantamount to a lingering metaphor for all Chinese people; perhaps what Sanyu does it may not be perfect, but it foreshadows another avenue for modern art to take for the Chinese. They have existed and deserve to be appreciated for history, and have not lost their significance for the pursuit of modernity in Chinese art today.”

In the face of the future, the poetic character of Sanyu's paintings further supports the fact that Chinese literati art is still relevant to the creation of modern paintings. This characteristic, as a necessary component of traditional Chinese culture, still permeates all aspects of modern art. As one of the representatives of the early painters who travelled to France, Sanyu humbly absorbed the essence of other cultures, and this artistic alternative is beneficial to the pursuit of modernity in today's art, as China's traditional culture pushes forward with new vigour and vitality in the scrubbing of the times.

Integration and Transformation of Chinese and Western Art

Spatial arrangements

The word ‘management’ is used in Chinese painting composition, which refers to the way of arranging the position of objects according to the needs, aiming to seek balance in the changes and creating a

dynamic and rhythmic picture effect. Sanyu is a person with the spirit of experimentation, his composition absorbs the structural division principle of Western modern art, but also contains the unique layout rules of the Orient. Traditional Chinese literati paintings emphasise the interplay of yin and yang, and make good use of the principle of the Tai Chi diagram of yin and yang, and Sanyu's artworks have obviously absorbed this essence, with simple and clear compositions that are both modern and contemporary. Mr Sanyu often uses a left-right symmetrical middle composition, which is balanced with rigour and atmosphere, and symmetrical with small changes. This composition is mostly used in his flower series, such as Potted Flowers (e.g. Figure 4).



Figure.4 Sanyu, Potted Flowers

Traditional Chinese landscape paintings are different from the traditional Western landscape paintings in terms of focal point perspective, adopting a scattered perspective, and the choice of perspective is also different from Western paintings, which mostly focuses on the profound and lofty, to express the magnificent scenery of mountains and rivers. There are also works that adopt a flat perspective. No matter what the subject matter of the painting, the horizontal line usually divides the background into two major parts and is much lower than the normal point of view. This method of painting also reflects the creator's pursuit of a freewheeling attitude towards life, mainly depicting and conveying a sense of artistic intent. As it happens, Sanyu's works mostly use the horizontal viewpoint, which is a landscape painting technique, but he is applying it to the subject of figures.

Take *Nude Woman with Bent Legs* as an example, this painting is Sanyu's last nude woman painting, and also the largest in size, with the picture using both a flat and a high perspective. There is less in-your-face desire in this painting, and the lines are no longer calligraphic and ethereal. The lines are jinshi, and the brushwork is like a knife, both hard and decisive, both in the human body and in the landscape. It looks like a few strokes, but it seems to use all the energy to look back at the past of a lifetime. The woman is lying horizontally, with the upper body in a horizontal perspective and the legs bent and folded horizontally and vertically, in an upward perspective, resembling two majestic mountains, at hand, with a full sense of depth (e.g. Figure 5). Sanyu incorporated the essence of Chinese composition into his Western paintings, adding an oriental literati flavour to modernist paintings.



Figure.5 Sanyu, Nude Girl with Bent Legs

Use of lines

Line, as one of the expressive forms in the language of Chinese and Western painting, has a strong expressive role in artistic creation. Compared with the West, traditional Chinese painting relies more on line and focuses on modelling with line. From Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty to Wu Daozi of the Tang Dynasty, from Ni Zan of the late Yuan Dynasty to Bada Shanren of the early Qing Dynasty, line has played an indispensable role in the entire history of painting. Calligraphy, which has the same origin as painting, can also be regarded as the art of line combination. These theories have long been ingrained in Sanyu's mind, and Mr Sanyu has replaced the oil brush strokes with the "brush strokes" of Chinese painting, adopting a "one-stroke" approach to outline, and expressing the beauty of a mood with oriental flavours through lines. Regardless of whether it is a conscious means of expression or an unconscious habit of practicing calligraphy, the lines of his brushwork have become the signature of his 'Sanyu style' from the early meticulousness of his brushstrokes to the old vigour and strength of his brushstrokes in the middle and late stages of his life.

Take the 'Pink Period' Plum Blossom Deer (e.g. Figure 6) as an example, this is a typical example of Sanyu's great achievement of fusion of East and West - the combination of traditional Chinese painting materials and Western watercolours, with the brush outlining the contours of the form, and embellishing it with light colours. The lines in the picture resemble Wu Daozi's orchid leaves, and the joints of the deer resemble zigzagging clothing patterns, with uneven pressure, thick and thin, shaped like orchid leaves. Especially in the hips, the strokes are extremely clever, sometimes lifting and sometimes pausing, with a good sense of reality and a full sense of rhythm. Other parts of the line is also clean and smooth, a made, each line is used just right, presenting a living plum blossom deer. The seemingly effortless use of the brush is the result of his long-term training and a reflection of his profound calligraphy skills. Sanyu is no longer satisfied with simply using lines to achieve a certain picture effect, but the pursuit of human, painting the realm of unity, sentiments in the pen, with the heart to control the force, with the rhythm of breathing 'write' out of the pen ink.



Figure.6 Sanyu, Deer with Plum Blossoms



Figure.7 Sanyu, Lonely Little Elephant

The YIN and YANG relationship of colours

Western painting focuses on the modelling of light and dark, relying on changes in hue to distinguish hierarchical relationships, and pursuing the beauty of harmony and strength; while Chinese painting is rich in profound Taoist thought, most of the traditional ink paintings have only black and white, and seek to harmonise the Yin and Yang, modelling the painting with lines. Through the delicate arrangement of lines, it creates a wonderful space and pursues a kind of vernacular and decorative beauty. Chinese painting has been developed for a thousand years, taking the Tao as the root of painting, and the concept of black and white is carried out in every literati's picture. But is such a concept limited to black and white? Sanyu gives us the answer.

An example is this painting of a lonely baby elephant (e.g. Figure 7). The colours in the picture are global and imply traditional Taoist learning. Taken as a whole, the large expanse of yellow as the base colour is regarded as Yin, and the small elephant in the middle with the heavy block of colour at the bottom is regarded as Yang. The lower brightness of the colours throughout the painting sets off the small elephant as the eye of the painting. Sanyu's use of colour follows the Taoist concept of "one life, two lives, three lives, and three lives all things", and each of his works has no more than three colours. From black comes white, and from black and white with intermediate tones comes the world of Sanyu's art. Sanyu puts the small elephant in the desert, and the overall view is only ochre yellow, black and brown, with ochre slightly penetrating into the earthy yellow background, and blue-green tones are added as coordination, making the overall breathable but not dull. The image at the bottom has been detached from its original colour, and we can't tell what he is painting, either water or land, and its colour echoes the small elephant, adding weight and adjusting the rhythm of the picture. The four corners of the picture are treated with dark corners, the right one being the most obvious, which highlights the main object and at the same time expresses the direction in which the little elephant is heading, which is lost. It is boundless, empty and aimless, fully displaying its inner loneliness.

Sanyu pointed to the small elephant in the picture and said to his friend, "This is me." In real life, when an elephant senses that its death is imminent, it will leave the herd and find a quiet place to wait for its death. This painting is Sanyu's final work, and it inevitably evokes this image.

Colour is a necessary factor in oil painting. Western traditional painting enhances the depth of field through colour, and regulates the warm and cold tones through hue changes, thus controlling the rhythm of the picture. However, modern art is not static, and cultural exchanges between the East and the West have opened a window for artistic diversity. Sanyu is not a worshipper of modern art, nor a nationalist of traditional art. His subjective treatment of colour in his oil paintings proves that traditional pictorialism and modernity are not in conflict with each other, but rather complement each other. Sanyu's colours are born to serve the picture, using the simplest colours to present us with either dreamy or painful effects.

Concern for personal destiny

Sanyu was born in the early Qing Dynasty, since childhood to accept the traditional art education, learning books and paintings deeply Mr Zhao Xi's teaching, while the traditional literati

concept of inculcation in its destiny also sowed the seeds of tragedy. This literati character is not innate, and its family conditions related to the growth of the environment in the need not be trapped for money, it is inevitable that the formation of a "son of the" habits. What Sanyu pursued was the lifestyle of the Chinese literati, who lived at ease, enjoyed wine, and did not have to worry about worldly matters. During the first twenty years of his residence in Paris, Sanyu lived as he pleased, but despite his later years of poverty, he remained true to his original vision, and tried as much as he could to move closer to the realm of the literati's secluded life.

Sanyu's literati character has also brought many inconveniences to his career development, but it is his life style, which is different from that of the common people, that has led to the achievement of his 'Sanyu Style', which has a strong oriental connotation. His paintings are meticulous in the use of colours, and his style is clear and magnificent, simple and elegant, using western media to express the feelings of oriental literati, forming an irresistible temperament, and his works are like a spring of fresh water, which is pleasing to the eyes of the viewers. As a Dutch art critic said, "Anyone who is not moved by Sanyu's works can be said to be uninterested." This modern style of painting once became the target of all major painting dealers.

Sanyu compares the colourful paintings of Europe to sumptuous dishes such as barbecue and fried food, while he describes his own as a vegetarian diet of vegetables, fruits and salads, which is "Bland but indispensable, helping people to try out different tastes in art." Sanyu expresses his authenticity in witty and humorous terms, saying "I don't cheat", and it is this authenticity that is the beauty we seek. If Sanyu were to be compared to a plant, researchers believe that the flower of the Oriental is the most suitable for him, learnt from nature and returned to nature, not in a hurry, not in a hurry, refreshing and unassuming, not sad that no one appreciates him, nor proud that he is sought after by millions of people, quite like the traditional literati who pursued the pursuit of the water to the drain.

Sanyu's works are outlined in ink but not delicate, the colours are piled up but not heavy, and the slightly exaggerated shapes convey a beauty of objects that transcends nature. The spontaneity of his works is the expression of his artistic talent, as well as the release of his uninhibited, leisurely and peaceful character.

Synthesis of Findings

Through the application of iconographic, comparative, and contextual analysis, this study identifies three major aspects that define the embodiment of modernity in Sanyu's art.

First, from the perspective of artistic language, Sanyu's use of simplified forms, dynamic lines, and expressive colour reveals a transformation from imitation to innovation. His brushwork—derived from Chinese calligraphic rhythm—produces an aesthetic of fluidity and restraint that parallels the modernist pursuit of abstraction and emotion.

Second, the fusion of Chinese and Western visual systems demonstrates how Sanyu restructured pictorial space. By adopting Western oil painting techniques while maintaining the compositional logic of Chinese literati painting, he achieved a poetic balance between void and substance, symmetry and rhythm. This spatial hybridity expresses both cultural negotiation and artistic self-awareness.

Third, from a cultural and philosophical standpoint, Sanyu's art embodies the modern condition of individual reflection within a cross-cultural context. His subjects—horses, nudes, and still lifes—function as metaphors for solitude, vitality, and introspection, reflecting an inner dialogue between the self and the world.

Collectively, these findings reveal that Sanyu's modernity is not merely formal but deeply existential. His works illustrate how a Chinese artist reinterpreted the essence of modernism through a unique synthesis of cultural memory, spiritual poetics, and creative independence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that Sanyu occupies a distinct position in the history of modern art as an artist who successfully integrated Eastern aesthetics with Western modernist principles. His creative practice exemplifies how modernity, rather than being a purely Western construct, can emerge through intercultural transformation and personal expression.

Sanyu's art transcends the boundaries of style and geography by internalizing the spirit of the Chinese literati—emphasizing emotion, simplicity, and harmony—while employing the expressive potential of modernist visual language. His poetic and introspective approach reshaped the meaning of artistic modernity into a form that values both cultural continuity and individual innovation.

The study highlights that Sanyu's oeuvre serves as a bridge between two artistic civilizations, illustrating how modern art can function as a space for dialogue rather than domination. His legacy offers an alternative paradigm of non-Western modernity, one grounded in the fusion of intuition and rationality, tradition and experiment.

Future research may extend this inquiry by situating Sanyu within broader comparative frameworks of transnational modernism, exploring how similar hybrid aesthetics appeared in other non-Western contexts. Such investigations would further enrich the understanding of modernity as a plural, evolving process shaped by global artistic exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) for academic guidance and institutional support during the preparation of this paper.

No funding

- This study was not supported by any grants from funding bodies in the public, private, or not-for-profit sectors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Zhang Ran: Conceptualization, Literature Review, Methodology, Data Curation, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Visualization. **Wan Samiati Andriana BT W. Mohamad Daud:** Supervision, Methodological Refinement, Validation, Writing—Reviewing and Editing, Final Approval of the Version to be Published. **Liu Jingrou:** Data Collection, Translation, Formal Analysis, Editing Support, and Reference Verification.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data available within the article or its supplementary materials.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used OpenAI ChatGPT (GPT-5, 2025) to enhance the clarity of the writing. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

ETHIC STATEMENTS

Not applicable.

REFERENCES

- Chen,H.(2016).The Research On Sanyu Painting Language.*China Univercity of Mining&Technology*.
- Liu,F.(2023).The study and application in poetic expressions of Sanyu's oil paintings.*Hubei Institute of Fine Arts*.
- Bretel,R.(2012).Modern art:1851-1929.Translated by Zhuge Yi.*Shanghai People's Art Publishing House*.
- Claire,J.(2012).Translated by Guo Hong'an. The painter of modern life. Shanghai Translation Publishing House. Vol.2,pp. 19.
- Du,D.(2012). Sanyu and its Implications for Modernity. *Jurnal Oriental Art*.no.5, pp.136-141.
- Gu,Y. (2007), Sanyu - World Famous Painter, *Hebei Education Press*.
- Gu,Y. (2008),Research on San Yu and the Modernity of Chinese Fine Arts.*Tsinghua University*.
- Gao Y.(2001). The Art of Painting by Sanyu .*National Museum of History*.
- Sullivan, M.(1996).Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China.*Berkekey:University of California Press*.
- Sullivan, M.(2014).Translated by Zhao Xiao. The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art.*Shanghai People's Publishing House*.
- Jiang Bin (2022).A linear comparative study of the lotus subject matter between Zhu Da and Sanyu. *The Grand View of Art*.(22),49-51. doi:CNKI:SUN. YSDG.0.2022-22-022.
- Yu Rui (2023).A study on the style and implication of Sanyu's animal painting.*Anhui Polytechnic University*.<https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFDTEMP&filename=1023716016.nh>
- Yang Qiaoyu (2022).Study on freehand freehand in Sanyu's figure painting.*DAGUAN*, (01),144-146. doi:CNKI:SUN:DAGN.0.2022-01-049.