

The Realm of Modern Beauty: Three Masterpieces from the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection

 sothebys.com/en/articles/the-realm-of-modern-beauty-three-masterpieces-from-the-liu-yiqian-and-wang-wei-collection

By Marian Ang | Sep 7, 2023

Ahead of Sotheby's Hong Kong Autumn 2023 sales, we take a closer look at three landmark paintings from the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection that radically transformed representation of the female body in modern art history.

Divine, modest, perfection, fleshy, uninhibited: the female body has been represented in innumerable ways over the millennia. The rise of European modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a radical transformation in this tradition. Whilst beauty in the early 19th century Western tradition was equated with the writhing nudes of Delacroix and Ingres's coquettish odalisques, what followed was a shockingly explicit riposte, from Courbet's audacious *L'Origine du monde* (1866), which stripped the trope away to its fundamentals, to Degas's poetic portraits of wearied women going about their ordinary lives. This vanguard of modernism was rooted in the artistic ferment of the École de Paris émigré community, gathered in the cafés, salons, studios, galleries of Montparnasse – who counted amongst their number Amedeo Modigliani, René Magritte and Léonard Tsugouharu Foujita. Musing upon the new spirit of the modernist age in *Les Peintres Cubistes Méditations esthétiques* (1913), the legendary French art critic and poet Guillaume Apollinaire remarked:

The modern school of painting seems to me the most audacious that has ever appeared. It has posed the question of what is beautiful in itself. It wants to visualise beauty disengaged from whatever charm man has for men, and until now, no European artist has dared attempt this. The new artists demand an ideal beauty, which will be, not merely the proud expression of the species, but the expression of the universe [...]. The new art clothes its creations with a grandiose and monumental appearance which surpasses anything else conceived by the artists of our time. Ardent in its search for beauty, it is noble and energetic, and the reality it brings us is marvellously clear.



Amedeo Modigliani, Paulette Jourdain, c.1919 | Estimate upon request

Paris was the only spot where necessary blendings could be made and mellowed, where it was possible to shake up such 'modern' doses as Viennese psychology, African sculpture, American detective stories, Russian music, neo-Catholicism, German technique, Italian desperation.

Harold Rosenberg

Modern beauty was best epitomised by Modigliani's emotionally intense portraits, in particular the masterpiece *Paulette Jourdain* (c.1919). Not one to distinguish the way he painted ordinary members of society from his wealthier sitters, the Italian artist "could never forget his interest in people, and he painted them, so to say, with abandon, urged on by the intensity of his feeling and vision," according to his friend and Cubist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz. Towards the end of his brief and turbulent life, but his fame by now firmly established, Modigliani painted the 14-year-old housemaid of his dealer Léopold Zborowski. Jourdain had carved an adventurous path from her humble beginnings in the small

coastal town of Concarneau in Brittany, to the bright lights of Paris, where she posed for other artists including Chaïm Soutine and Moïse Kisling, eventually becoming Zborowski's lover and having a daughter with him in 1924. Upon Zborowski's premature death in 1932, she took over operations of his gallery and continued as an art dealer until the onset of World War II. The young Jourdain's portrait exalts her humble background: her austere clothing, black-ribboned hair and clasped hands are animated by bold, swerving lines that echo the linear forms of African sculpture, transforming her into a totemic symbol of dignity. Jourdain's impenetrable gaze offers a defiant retort to her modest circumstances. The background's sharply angular lines nod to Modigliani's close association with the Cubists, with whom he exhibited stylised sculptures of elongated oval heads and almond-shaped eyes at the 1912 Salon d'Automne. This love of "strange and novel forms" was combined with a nod to the Old Masters, in particular the inner light captured in the subjects of the Italian Renaissance master Fra Angelico, and the enigmatic gaze of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. This collision of worlds drove Modigliani's vision, producing unforgettable works that embodied the modernising spirit of the École de Paris.



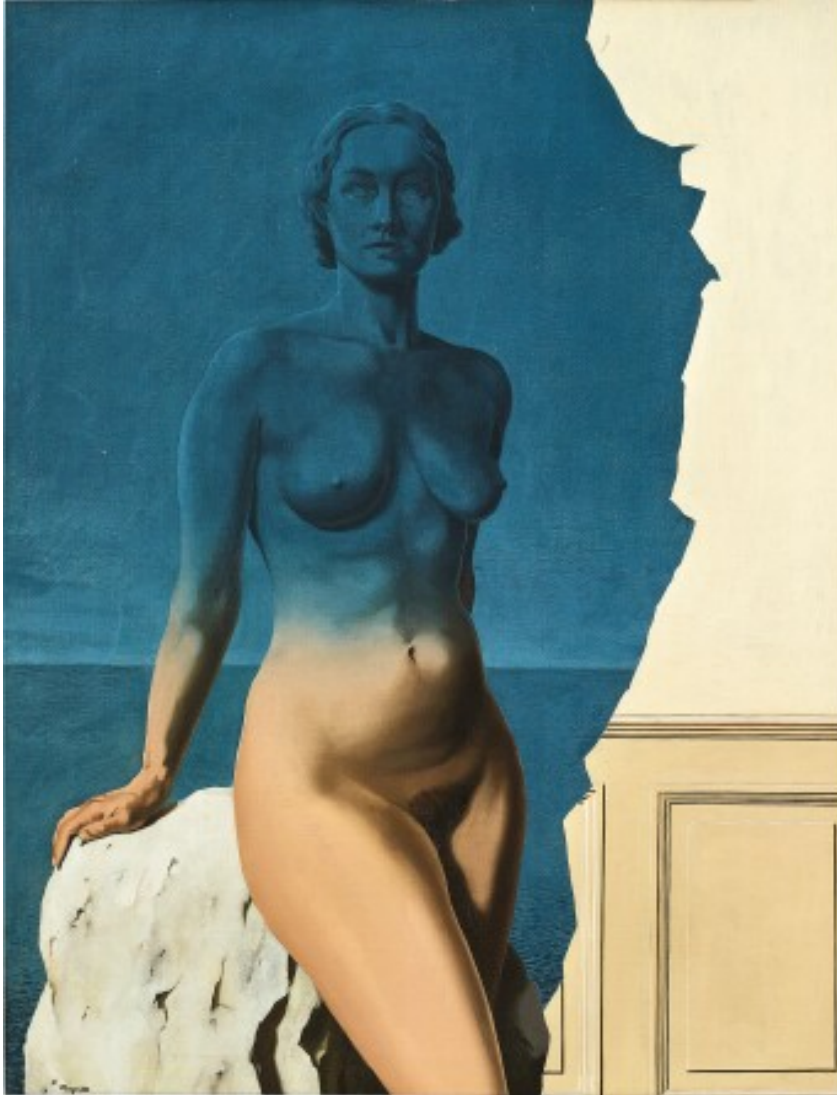
Léonard Tsugouharu Foujita, Nu au chat, 1930 | Estimate: 40,000,000 - 60,000,000 HKD

In order to give form to my fine lines, I needed a smoother and more lustrous canvas. It was hard to turn the blank space into a space rich in texture. This unpainted part has long been the strong point of nihonga.

Léonard Tsugouharu Foujita

Deemed "the laboratory of the twentieth century" by the influential American art critic Harold Rosenberg, Paris's influx of artists of all nationalities led to a fervent cross-fertilisation of cultures and ideas. In the midst of this vibrant artistic milieu, Modigliani's path crossed with that of the flamboyant Japanese painter and bon viveur, Léonard Tsugouharu Foujita. Arriving in Marseille in 1913 aged 26, by the 1920s "Fou-Fou" (as he was nicknamed by his French friends) was so well-known in Paris that department store windows were dressed with mannequins bearing his trademark bangs, gold hooped earrings and round tortoiseshell glasses. In 1921, Foujita fell irredeemably in love "with a lovely, lovely beauty of almost twenty, and she also loves me," he wrote excitedly to a friend. The object of his affections, Lucie Badoud, possessed lustrous copper-toned hair and skin so enchantingly white that he gave her a new name, 'Youki' – the Japanese word for snow. Foujita's inventive hybrid Eastern-Western painting techniques found their apex in his sensational paintings of Youki, most notably *Nu au chat* (1930), with sumi ink lines

contouring the radiant *grand fond blanc* of her delicate ivory flesh. Foujita closely guarded the recipe for his signature luminous milky glaze, which was formed from a mixture of flaxseed oil, crushed chalk (or white lead) and magnesium silicate. Combined with his Japanese heritage, in particular the aesthetic of woodblock ukiyo-e prints and the Japanese concept of *ma* (or negative space), Foujita transformed Western figurative painting into a sublime and minimalist celebration of sensuousness.



René Magritte, *Le miroir universel*, 1938-39 | Estimate: 70,000,000 - 95,000,000 HKD

| La magie noire is an act of black magic to turn a woman's flesh into sky.

René Magritte

The Pygmalionesque act of breathing life into inanimate matter is an idea that seized the imagination of the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte. *Le miroir universel* (1938-39) originated from Magritte's *La magie noire* (1934) series, becoming one of a half-dozen works painted that portrayed the naked form of his wife Georgette Berger leaning against a rock as she metamorphoses from the waist upwards into the cerulean blue sky. Magritte had met Georgette as the 12-year-old daughter of a butcher, but now nearly two decades after being wedded, their marriage had entered a challenging phase. Magritte had embarked upon an affair with young British Surrealist, Sheila Legge, and arranged for his friend Paul Colinet to entertain and distract Georgette. However, the two also became entangled in an affair of their own. The

familiar had suddenly become unknowable, the boundaries between inner and outer worlds had ruptured unexpectedly, and Magritte's painterly dream of the eternal feminine is intruded upon by the prosaic wainscoting of a bourgeois Belgian house in *Le miroir universel*. Magritte's surrealist alchemy captured the turbulence of the age, and the 'black magic' in the air as Europe witnessed the dissolution of peace and the old order in the days leading up to World War II. Magritte's vision of Georgette as a modern Venus of the night sky brings together the intimate and the infinite, achieving the impossible expression of a dream turned into a thought.

A Long Journey: A Selection from the Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei Collection

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.