

PEOPLE AND LANDSCAPE

Introduction

The two artists I chose are L.S Lowry and Ruan Sidi. I selected the paintings Going To the Match and Coming From the Mill by Lowry and Across the River by Ruan Sidi. Lowry is a British painter whereas Ruan Sidi is a cultural folk artist from China.

To begin with, I am interested in how artists depict the daily life of ordinary everyday people in different context. Meanwhile, born and raised in China, I wish to explore more on the art from my own culture, and I also have access to more information about Ruan Sidi. Moreover, hearing about the purposes and functions of Ruan's works, I am interested to know how a nation's government might influence a style of art because her paintings seem to show scenes of fantasy which are somewhat unrealistic. In contrast, I picked Lowry's paintings because they are realistic social comments about post-industrial revolution in Britain, which do not show fantasy. Briefly speaking, one artist is upholding a lifestyle of people which is to some extent fabricated, while the other is reflecting the reality of people's life. One of the most obvious distinction between the two artists is their use of color. In the Chinese work, Ruan applies vibrant bright colors. On the contrary, Lowry's works are painted in dusky creamy colors.

From the perspective of an individual, Lowry works independently, with little restraint from the outside, responding to his environment. However, Ruan appears to be following a prescribed style of art which has been prevalent for a time period in China's history although few Chinese critics nowadays value this artistic approach, since those works can be seen as being too naive and gaudy. Further more, the audience today can access the subjects of Ruan only through a nostalgic or idealized fantasy of what China might have been like in the past. For these reasons, the methods, the subject matter and the message are not empathizing to the audience's perception of society.

Last but not least, China's speedy development in its economy shares commonalities with the changes Lowry observed and recorded in northern England nearly a century earlier. As a country with a huge population and rapid industrial growth, China has similar social problems caused by its economic development, crowded dwellings of people, etc., so Lowry's works on cityscape easily provoke my own resonance and reflection.



Going To the Match by L.S Lowry, Britain, Pastel on paper, 43.7 x 56.1cm, 1917-18,



Coming From the Mill by L.S Lowry, Britain, oil and pencil, 28''X 36'', 1928



The River by Ruan Sidi, China, on rice paper, 25 x 22 1/2 inches

Q&As:

1. Q: Did both artists work at the same time in history? What are their social backgrounds?

A: Lowry's works about industrial scene were mostly from the late 1920s to 1930s after the second Industrial Revolution (1870s~early 20th century) which significantly influenced people's life in Britain, but Ruan started peasant painting in 1979, 3 years after the ending of the Great Cultural Revolution in China.

2. Q: Did both artists belong to any art groups?

A: Lowry works independently so it is not precise to say that he was part of any art group. However, Ruan was part of Chinese folk art which did not evolve naturally but was consciously organized by the government.

3. Q: Which materials did Ruan Sidi use?

A: Pencil and gouache.

4. Q: What are the foundations of Ruan's peasant painting? What inspired or facilitated her work?

A: Chinese traditional paper-cutting, needle work and embroidering elements, which she started doing at a young age.

5. Q: What is special about Lowry's method of painting?

A: To build the special murky tone of the scene, Lowry smudges, erases and rubs the pencil lines on the surface of paper. Some paintings are painted over the surface of different images. Additionally, he sometimes even used both ends of the brush, together with his fingers, nails or sticks.

6. Q: What is the main topic of Ruan's works?

A: People's Utopian life and the "false" portrayal of abundant harvests in the countryside which are unreal.

Lowry's Going To the Match



Going To the Match, L.S Lowry, oil and pencil, 28"X 36", 1928

Formal analysis :

The painting is divided in half by the stadium buildings. It offers a distant view to over open before it to a pale distance and high horizon. The scene is viewed from near to far by an observer from a level slightly higher than the ground, as if from an upper storey. It follows the principles of simple perspective. The upper part of the painting is a quiet area, contrasting the crowded lower half. In addition, the people are arranged in the pattern of converging lines towards a center of focus--the queues at the stadium entrance. Therefore, the large crowd does not look messy. The painting is two-dimensional, painted with oil and prints, marked with pencil. In the painting, the author used a small range of colors that are creamy and somber but have a strong contrast, creating a monotonous and gloomy tone but make the figures stand out and emphasize the industrial gloom. Moreover, the lines in this work are simple with precisely applied brush marks, displaying an economy of line to describe complex information. Further more, the shapes are mainly geometric shapes (e.g. In the buildings). Also, as many of other Lowry's works, this painting has a smudged surface, without any patterns. Last but not least, in this painting, Lowry depicts hundreds of stark stylized figures (matchstick men) against the backdrop of factories with smoking chimneys.

The original painting was bought for £1.9million by the UK Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) in 1999. It is temporarily on display at The National Football Museum and has recently been valued at £6-10million.¹

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-12324389>

Lowry's Coming From the Mill



Coming From the Mill, L.S Lowry, Pastel on paper, 43.7 x 56.1cm, 1917-18,

Formal Analysis :

“Coming From the Mill” is similar to “Going To the Match” in terms of style. The buildings are the main backdrop to this painting, viewed from ground level, the lower buildings in the same horizontal row in front of other buildings divide the painting into approximately in a ratio of 2:1. Among the buildings, those located nearer to the audience are roughly symmetrical. This painting also applies atmospheric perspective to draw the viewers’ attention from a clearer and sharper foreground back forwards a misty and paler background. Buildings and chimneys in the distance seem shrouded by smog. Colors are creamy, which create a melancholy and depressed mood. However, personally speaking, this painting gives me an ambiguous yet warm feeling. As one of Lowry's earliest composite industrial scenes, and early example of what has become known as the Lowry style¹, this painting was painted before he decided to use a white background in his oil paintings².

¹ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L._S._Lowry)

² (<http://www.thelowry.com/ts-lowry/microsite/art/industrial-scenes/coming-from-the-mill-c1917-18/#cwjdo5225h10SImT.99>)

Ruan's The River

Formal analysis :

There seem to be several viewpoints in this painting. For instance, at the same time when we overlook at the river, we are actually observing the trees on their horizontal level since we can see the whole side of them. Actually, Ruan's works are stylized or even a bit abstract. She uses a wide range of bright and naive colors that are often unrealistic such as the blue color for the buffalo and the tree trunks. The background is black to reinforce the contrast so that the subjects could stand out against it. Besides, the conspicuous white river separates the whole painting into two irregular parts. Furthermore, the objects are simplified and stylized. The lines in this painting are clear and smooth, while the shapes are mostly organic. Ruan's peasant paintings often have a tight composition. Neither shadings nor principles of perspective can be seen in the painting. However, the childish style naturally creates a festive and lively mood. Finally, Ruan works in a simple way. She uses pencil to draw the outlines of everything on rice paper and then applies gouache precisely with a range of small brushes.



The River, Ruan Sidi, gouache, 25 x 22 1/2 inches



Photo of the countryside in the period of the Great Leap Forward. 1000 x 686 mm
<http://diyitui.com/content-1421694102.26415578.html>

Comparing Formal Qualities

The works created by the two artists at first glance appear to have few in common in that they have apparent differences concerning formal qualities. For example, compared to the sharp and distinguishable lines in Ruan's work, Lowry tends to outline the objects in a more hazy and soft way, with creamy and thicker colors which create a somber and dim tone. Also, the composition of Ruan's work is fuller, with figures in the middle of the painting. Besides, the techniques applied are different. Lowry's works are more realistic in depicting the scenes whereas Ruan's feels more abstract and stylized.

Nonetheless, their subjects are similar since they both present people's life with the backdrop of their local landscapes, aiming to delineate people's general living and working conditions. Further more, all the three works show the relationship of people and their landscape or community. Lowry's pencil and brush marks were expressive, displaying every possible tone and texture that a pencil could make by the varying depths of gray which created a delicate surface of "colour".

His earliest works show the influence of his Victorian environment. The paint is dark and the images are often obscured by the density of opaque colors.

In short, there is an attempt by both artists to uphold the everyday life and the routine. Lowry seeks to illustrate the power of the human spirit even when seen amongst the dreary and depressing industrial landscape, whereas Ruan also wishes us to see the same power of the human spirit through those diligent, happy farmers in an idealized and romanticized landscape. Ruan is being more "romantic" than the other, while Lowry, at first appearing to be a naive artist, could be classified as an impressionist due to his use of slightly realistic color, his use of less distorted figures and his exaggeration of tonal values to create atmosphere.

Ruan's works are also seen to be naive, however, her bright use of colors, relic use of patterns, and choice of composition lends the paintings to an abstract feel.



Going To the Match, L.S. Lowry, oil and pencil, 28"X 36", 1928



Coming From the Mill, L.S. Lowry, Pastel on paper, 43.7 x 56.1cm, 1917-18

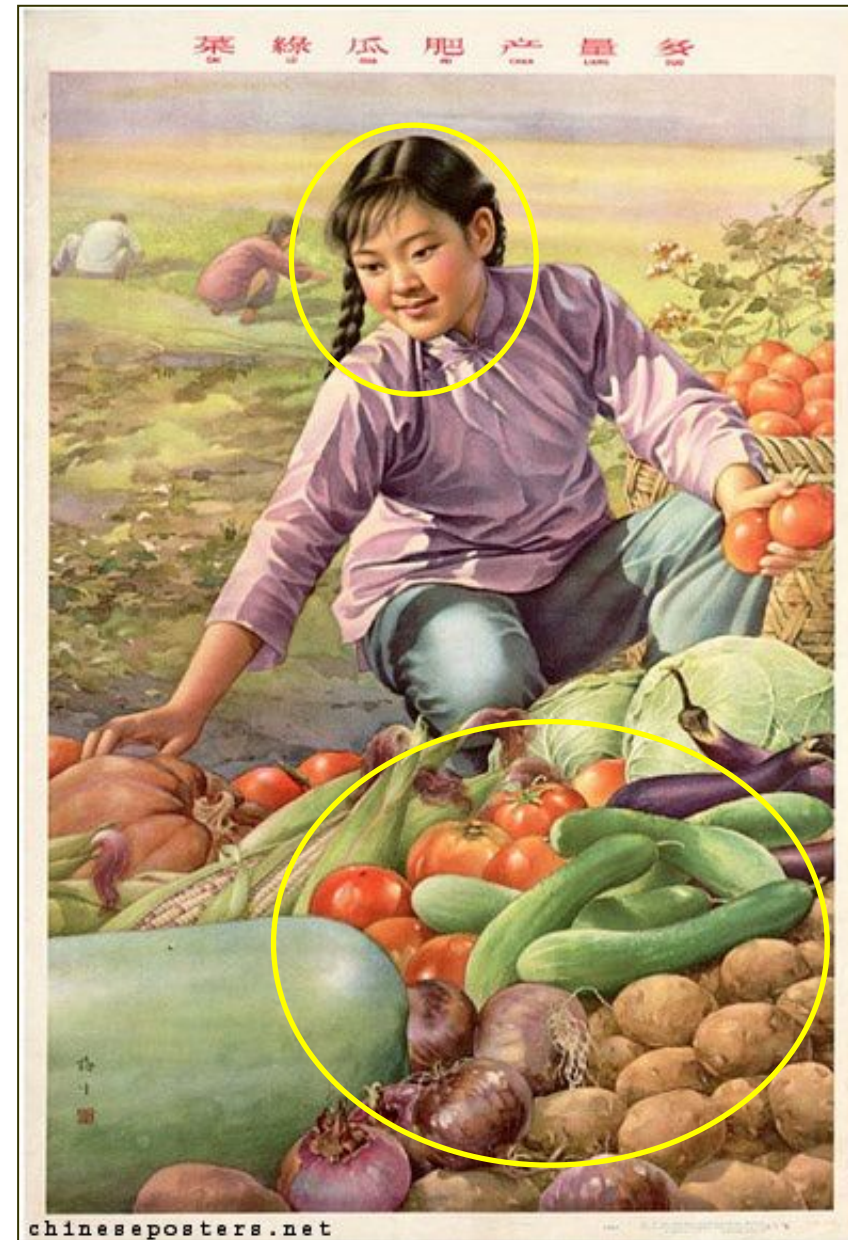


The River, Ruan Sidi, gouache on rice paper, 25 x 22 1/2 inches

Ruan' s The River

Cultural analysis:

Born in 1907 in the countryside of Jinshan, Shanghai, Ruan witnessed and experienced many of the influential events in the modern history of China in which the countryside was quite involved, approximately from 1949 to 1976 such as land reform movements, the Great Leap Forward, the People's Commune Movement, the Great Cultural Revolution, etc. During this time period, the mainstream thought of Chinese society was to worship socialism whole-heartedly. To propagandize socialism and Maoism, the Chinese government put up countless political posters and painted propaganda pictures with slogans everywhere. Shanghai, as an economically, politically and culturally important city in China, is a place where class struggles were even more fierce. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, Ruan's aesthetic concepts and style were influenced by them to a great extent.



http://www.360doc.com/content/12/0315/09/2687579_194466410.shtml

Political propaganda

Right after the Great Leap Forward in 1960 came the Great Famine. This propaganda poster that depicted "harvest" was repetitively printed. With exaggeration on the size and color of the vegetables, the scene in the poster was totally fabricated. Moreover, although painted in the Great Famine when most people were starving, the woman in the poster looks healthy and delighted instead. The Socialist Realist art style at this particular period of time is known for its vibrant colors and unrealistic scene.

This political poster is stylistically different from Ruan's but the subjects and features of those idealized romanticized landscapes are very similar:

- The joy in simple labor of working the land
- Bountiful harvest
- Colorful and abundant natural resources
- Healthy happy workers in beautiful rural settings
- Simple life=fun

Function and Purpose of Chinese peasant painting

As what had been discussed on the previous page, Chinese peasant painting was not a type of folk art that was formed naturally, but consciously organized and supported by Chinese government, as a tool for politics. Ruan learned painting skills in Jinshan Peasant Painting Institute, a village located in the outskirt of Shanghai, which was designed to be the most significant gathering place of Chinese folk artists in the whole nation since the 1970s. Before I visited the institute in 2015, Ruan had already passed away, so I talked to those who were born in her time period. According to an old peasant artist who started painting in the 1970s, when the institute was just established, its artists were asked by the government to paint political propaganda paintings that eulogized all those campaigns conducted by Communist Party of China. However, this style became a commodity afterwards.

In the 1980s, the Great Cultural Revolution ended and the “Reform and Opening” policy was carried out in China, which meant that Chinese peasant painting did not have the political subject. It was since then that the peasant artists started to depict the life in Chinese countryside instead of which they were most familiar with. Also, the purpose of painting changed from satisfying the government to meeting their own needs of living. “The foreign tourists were not interested in political paintings, so we began to paint farmers’ daily life in Jinshan. Since we have done almost all the farm work ourselves, including feeding ducks and ploughing fields, we are able to depict those scenes more vividly. At that time China was opening up to the ‘west’, and foreign customers liked our new paintings very much, so that we could make a living through selling artworks.” said the artist. It was the same case with Ruan Sidi, who always showed the scenes of working farmers and kept using bright and unrealistic colors owing to the great influence exerted by the period between the establishment of “new China” and the end of the Great Cultural Revolution.



A common poster in the 1970s in China

http://www.ekoooo.com/html/huaijiuzhongguo/jiuhuibao_zhaotie_jiuzhongguo/shishang/2010/0414/1878395.html

“I was one of a handful of people who first joined Jinshan Peasant Painting Institute. I painted for over 20 years. But my children do not paint any more.” added Zhu Suzhen, a women painter in her seventies.



Artist in Jinshan,working (photograph taken by me)

Based on the sales of different paintings, the artist would copy different number of the same painting by applying colors on the previous templates drawn by pencil. “Our peasant paintings do not have deep meanings,we paint for fun or simply to make money.” said a young artist who represents the new generation of peasant artist in Jinshan. “



Fresco on one of the walls in Jinshan Village (photograph taken by me)

The photo was taken in 2015. This is a painted wall in the Jinshan Peasant Painting Institute, which aims to attract more tourists. Peasant art has been the most important cultural element of this village as well as the most crucial tourist attraction. In the past thirty years, neither the technique nor the subject of the peasant art has changed.

Ruan's works show Chinese countryside culture, especially the folk artistic style of the Southern Yangtze region. She started doing Chinese traditional handicrafts such as paper cutting,embroidering and needle work, from a young age, which later became the foundation of her peasant paintings.



“When I was a teenager, I lived in Jinshan where I observed people farming and sometimes helped my family with some field work too. The landscapes in my works mainly originate from the environment in this village,” said Yao Xiping, “I learned peasant painting from the older generation of peasant painting artists, and now I teach some young people as well.” he later added.

Yao Xiping, standing in front of his works in his own exhibition room, taken by me.



The landscape of Jinshan village (photograph taken by me)

The peasant artists, most of whom were born and raised in this village, both live and work here now. They used to complain about the disturbance resulted from the great number of visitors surging into their homeland.

However, they are now able to maintain a peaceful life owing to the drastic decline in tourist number, which has aroused their new concerns about their financial income.

Indeed, the artists I met in the institute were mostly the elderly. Moreover, there were very few tourists in it even during the summer vacation. Less and less people are learning or painting peasant paintings on account that the general public in China usually consider this artistic style to be superficial and garish. Consequently, the attention paid on Jinshan peasant painting is constantly declining and this traditional Chinese form of art is on the verge of being a piece of history rather than a part of modern life.

L. S Lowry Cultural context:

L.S. Lowry (1887~1976) lived and worked for more than 40 years in industrial districts of Pendlebury, Salford, and its surrounding areas, which were the most frequent subjects of his drawings and paintings. Living in the northern Britain which was a precursor of the Second Industrial Revolution(1870s~early 20th century),the artist developed a distinctive style of painting comprising urban landscapes with human figures often referred to as "matchstick men" due to the simple economy of line used when he painted them. In 1909, his family moved from a suburb in to 117 Station Road in the industrial town of Pendlebury, and thus the surrounding landscape was filled with textile mills and factory chimneys. "At first I detested it, and then, after years I got pretty interested in it, then obsessed by it ” said Lowry. It is true that he took a proper art-school training, but the intensity of his work is free from any desire to conform to academic rules. Lowry creates a world of his own, childish and primitive, reflecting the cruel cityscapes of the industrial age and the drab life of the working class. However, it is undeniable that Lowry’s style was influenced by a few figures. In 1905, when he studied under the French Impressionist, Pierre Adolphe Valette at the Manchester School of Art. Also, Lowry deeply admired the Pre-Raphaelites like Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Lowry's oil paintings were originally impressionistic and dark in tone but a Mr. D. B. Taylor of the Manchester Guardian encouraged him to abandon the somber palette he was using. Taking this advice Lowry began to use a white background to lighten his pictures. In 1910s industrial scenes began to emerge in a large number of his works, in which Coming From the Mill is one of the earliest of the mill scenes. Unlike French impressionists who recorded the change of colors determined by the change of light, Lowry coherently used the colors he chose from the beginning: ochre, blue, black,white and red, sometimes mixed but

separate in most cases.²



Albert Square, Manchester by Pierre Adolphe Valette, 1910, Oil on jute, 152 x 114 cm, Manchester City Galleries



Coming from the Mill, 1930

Oil on canvas

58.5 x 45.5cm

The new version of Coming From the Mill demonstrates the development in the way Lowry painted, changing from the somber palette to a white background.

Valette’s most significant pupil was Lowry who called Valette "a real teacher...a dedicated teacher". "I cannot over-estimate the effect on me of the coming into this drab city of Adolphe Valette, full of French impressionists, aware of everything that was going on in Paris."³ added Lowry.

² L.S. Lowry, by Michael Leber & Judith Sanding, Phaidon Press, 1987

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/oct/14/exhibition-for-artist-who-inspired-lowry>



Stone Breaker, Le Raincy Georges Seurat. 1881, France,

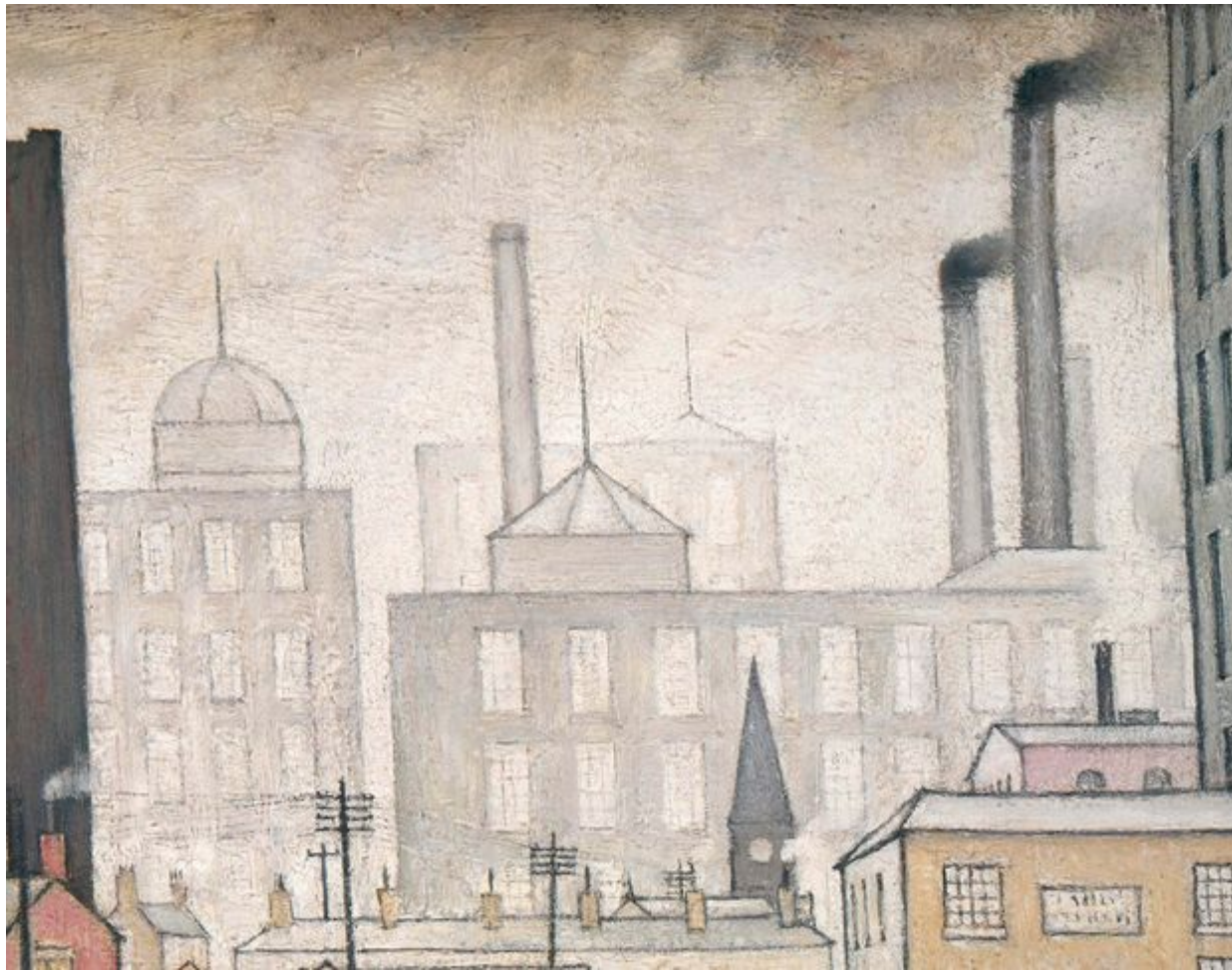
Impressionism, crayon on paper, 30.8 x 37.5 cm, Museum of

Modern Art, New York, USA

“In some very real way, Lowry, the loner, the outsider, is a quintessential part of English art; our critical ignorance of his work is therefore damaging both to our understanding of English art-and to our understanding of modernism.”
-- ‘Will It All Last...?’
Marina Vaizey

The industrial landscape

"Most of my land and townscape is composite. Made up; part real and part imaginary ... bits and pieces of my home locality. I don't even know I'm putting them in. They just crop up on their own, like things do in dreams."⁴



A detail of Coming From the Mill by L.S Lowry, 1918

During 1912~the late 1930s, he painted the industrial scene with little commercial success. Few galleries or collectors appreciated his work. However, he was unswerving in his mission, or, belief.

In the painting Coming From the Mill in the left, the buildings in the back appear to be fading away, as if this world was disappearing as he was painting it. Lowry's works expressed the fast pace of the industrial world and how fast things changed fast. There was an anecdote that in 1928 his father urged him to paint the blackened tower of St Simon's Church in Pendlebury only months before it was demolished. Lowry seemed to have a social responsibility to record his times.

from(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10111183/LS-Lowry-theres-more-to-him-than-matchstick-men.html>)



Lowry sketching in Salford (L.S. Lowry, by Michael Leber & Judith Sanding, Phaidon Press, 1987)

In 1910, Lowry joined the Pall Mall Property Company as rent collector, which provided him with the convenience to observe the industrial landscape and working class. On the bus between Pendlebury and Manchester when collecting rents, he sketched on anything that was handy such as old envelopes, cards, letters and bits of scrap paper since he was forever noting what was around him. His stated aim as an artist was to explore and record the industrial North.

"If I was asked my chief recreation, I ought to say walking about the streets of any poor quarter of any place I may happen to be in."

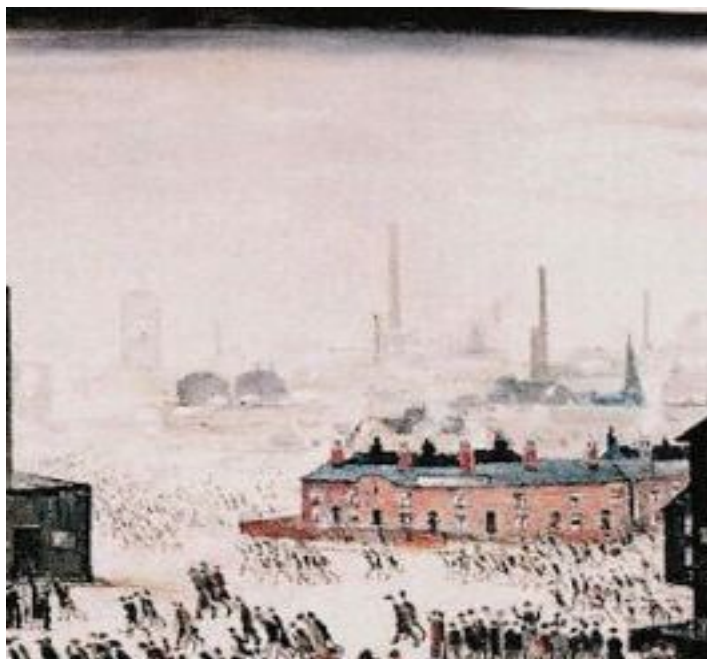
from(L. S. Lowry, by Michael Leber & Judith Sanding, Phaidon Press, 1987)

⁴ http://www.baidu.com/link?url=BKDby2tvuxkzDt4giWUyg6fPorD4fpznrHkl4aU_XDRVo3hntxKcHa2k9Vw5qVdxUmOosx074DxMP34b7MgLaq&wd=&eqid=da1589f7000c950b0000000656d8dc9c

Conceptual and cultural significance:

The world in Lowry's canvases became a bit nostalgic. A certain urban landscape or even some memory will be evoked if mentioning Lowry's paintings to British people of elder generations: factory walls, belching chimneys, looming mills, the streets below teeming with figures, invariably described as 'matchstick, moving with a kind of tidal drift towards, or away from, mill gateways, mines, football matches, political meetings. It' s a vision of Britain that older people know beneath the skin from the time when the country' s grimy, productive industrial North was simply a fact of life. And the scenes are now known by children because Lowry's art is taught in schools as a means to understanding a Britain that no longer exists now.⁵

Lowry's subject matter may now be Britain's past that's now gone. But it is,very much a part of the present of some newly industrialized countries such as China, so it still arouses people to think about their own economic development and the problems it causes⁶, also about the relationship between human life and its environment. Therefore, as Ruan delineates life in the rural areas, Lowry makes urban inhabitants think more about urbanization and industrialization.



Detail of *Going To the Match* by L.S Lowry, Britain, oil and pencil, 28''X 36'', 1928



Knocking off at Harland and Wolff shipyard, Belfast
(<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/11183>)



photo Unknown taken in recent day in China
(<http://www.taopic.com/tuku/201212/303061.html>)

In a way, both painters offer a window to a nation's past. Also, both of them provide a kind of social record of past times, which involves nostalgia. Both painters use stylization which is culturally rich.

⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10111183/LS-Lowry-theres-more-to-him-than-matchstick-men.html>

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10111183/LS-Lowry-theres-more-to-him-than-matchstick-men.html>

Figures in the paintings——Stylized vs. Realistic

Figures in Lowry's paintings



On the left is a photograph of Beijing's train station ahead of Chinese New Year when millions of migrant workers flock away from their factory production lines and head home. The curators hope Lowry's paintings will resonate with Chinese audiences because they will see echoes of their own. There is great affection for his subject matter and his very painting of it suggests a deep respect for the working communities that he was surrounded by. The people Lowry painted, like so many Chinese migrants today, were doing hard work for little pay.

(<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30248214>)

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30248214>



Coming From the Mill, L.S Lowry, Pastel on paper, 43.7 x 56.1cm, 1917-18

Lowry's figures look like tired, uniform 'pipe cleaners' with their sloping shoulders and clown's feet. Without the variety of colors or shadows, the figures' motion was created by a few strokes of the brush, stylized and abstracted by the 1930s. However, Lowry says "It wasn't that I felt sorry for those people; they were just as happy as anyone else, and certainly as happy as I was."⁷ Although enthusiastic about painting, Lowry did not give up his day job as a rent collector because of the access it gave him to his subject matter—people. 'I owe a lot to my tenants,' he said later in life. 'I put them in my pictures.' Far from working class himself, he nevertheless cultivated a lower middle class persona, maintaining a kind of passionate detachment from the industrial area in which he spent his most important painting years.⁸ About the stark "matchstick men" on his canvases, Lowry said, "I wanted to paint myself into what absorbed me... Natural figures would have broken the spell of it, so I made my figures half unreal... I was not thinking very much about the people. I did not care for them in the way a social reformer does. They are part of a private beauty that haunted me. I loved them and the houses in the same way: as part of a vision."

In his mind, everyone is lonely. Lowry was conscious of his loneliness. In one interview, he described how 'every human creature is an island'. His figures were, he remarked, 'often adrift in areas of lonely whiteness.' "Had I not been lonely, none of my work would have happened. I should not have done what I've done, or seen the way I saw things. I work because there's nothing else to do. Painting is a marvelous way of passing the time, and very interesting when you get into it."⁹

Sometimes the figures also help the composition, by drawing the viewers' attention into the activities, such as rows of walking figures leading into the heart of picture. At the same time, Lowry manages to guide viewers to look into the picture from certain direction, sometimes by a figure raising his arm and pointing somewhere. But he never brings the viewers inside a house.¹⁰

⁷ the Lonely Life of LS Lowry by Edwin Mullins

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10111183/LS-Lowry-theres-more-to-him-than-matchstick-men.html>

⁹ 'Will It All Last...?' Marina Vaizey

¹⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10111183/LS-Lowry-theres-more-to-him-than-matchstick-men.html>

Figures in Ruan's painting



Hong Xiao Bing 1972, Hong Xiao Bing Newspaper agency, 787×1092mm

红小兵 1972 年第 1 期（文革插图本,封面红小兵宣传画,封底：农业学大寨，工业学大庆,美帝欠债多,上海版）

This is the cover of *Hong Xiao Bing* 1972-01 by *Shanghai Hong Xiao Bing Paper Agency*, a magazine published for young cultural revolution pioneers. The red books in the kids' hands are *Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong*, which was also the main content of the magazine. The colors are bright, the sun is unrealistically red and the flowers are almost as big as the kids' faces. It is also noteworthy that the children's faces are nearly identical except for their hairstyles that tell their gender.



The River by Ruan Sidi, China, on rice paper, 25 x 22 1/2 inches

This is a detail from Ruan Sidi's *The River*.

Similarly, the figures are almost identical except for the colors of their clothes. Also, compared to the "matchstickmen" in Lowry's paintings, figures in Ruan's work appear to have more vitality and enjoy their job more, which perhaps reflects the contrast between urban and rural life of human beings.