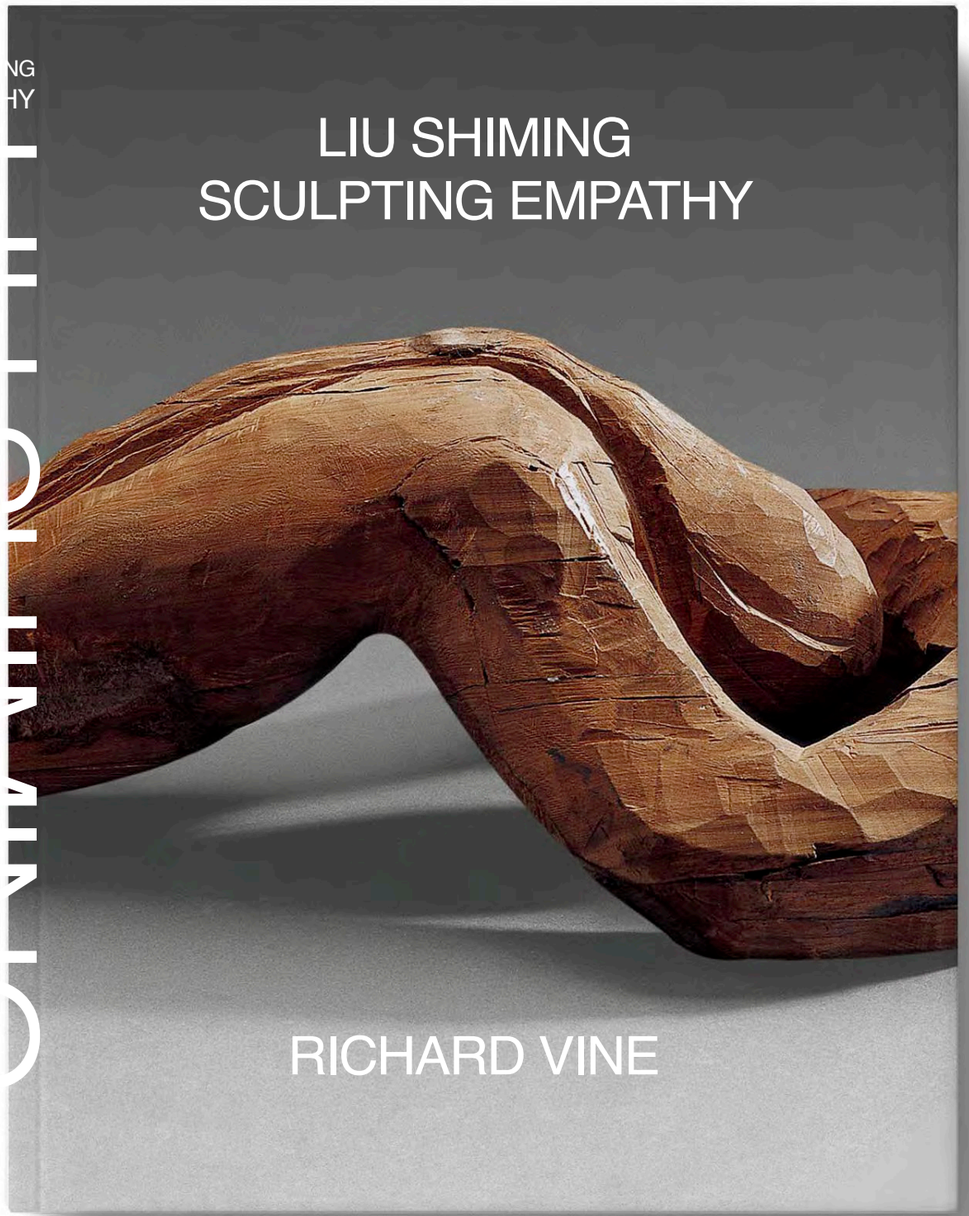
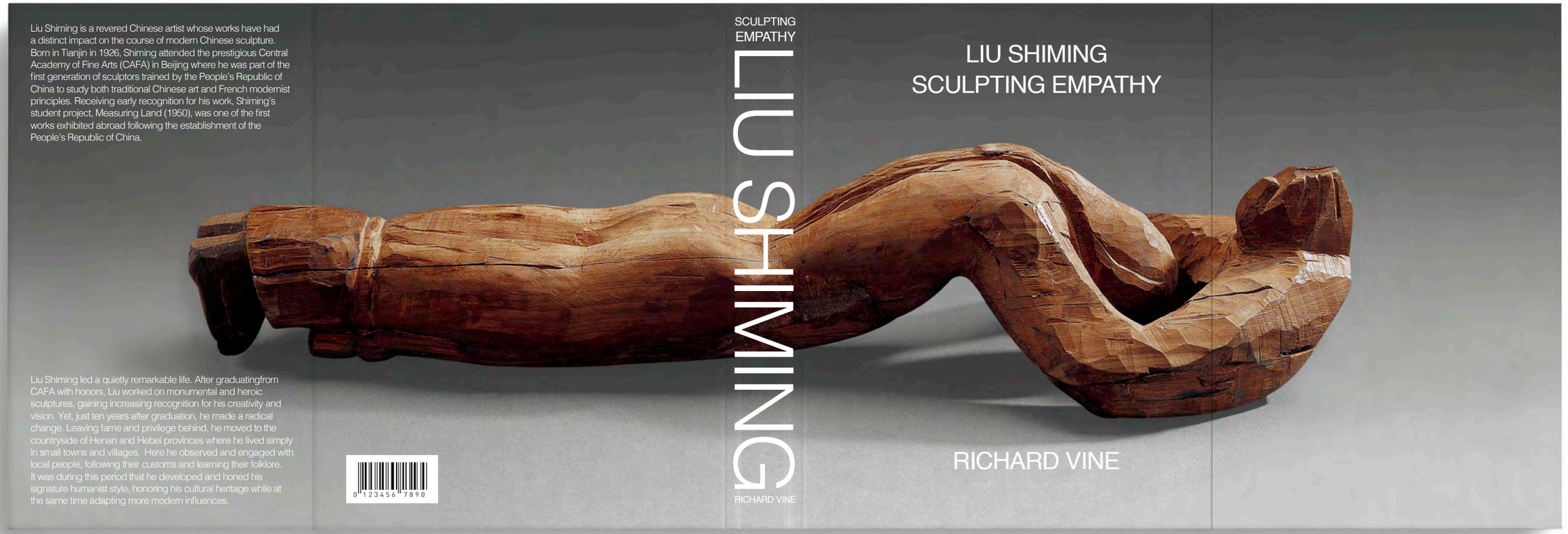


Liu Shiming
Sculpting Empathy
By Richard Vine
with support from the
Liu Shiming Art Foundation

Published by Rutgers University Press



BACK FLAP | BACK COVER | SPINE | COVER | FRONT FLAP

Why Liu Shiming?

Though well respected in China, the sculptor, who died in 2010 at the age of 84, is only now beginning to win the wider recognition he deserves. Meanwhile, contemporary competitors are numberless, most of them Instagram-friendly, while art history tends to focus on towering names and indisputably major movements and events: Braque and Picasso inventing Cubism, Duchamp's readymades redefining art itself, Warhol's mind-bending Brillo Boxes, etc. So why examine an artist in the middle ground?

Perhaps, first, because that is where the vast majority of us live, trying to make sense of our lives and grateful for the occasional insight, release, or enrichment that visual art can bring us.

Second, because the story of Liu Shiming reveals a great deal about the forces that have shaped postwar art worldwide. He was a man who sought to lead a simple life, dedicated entirely to art, in the midst of China's epochal, dangerously complex 20th-century social and political changes.

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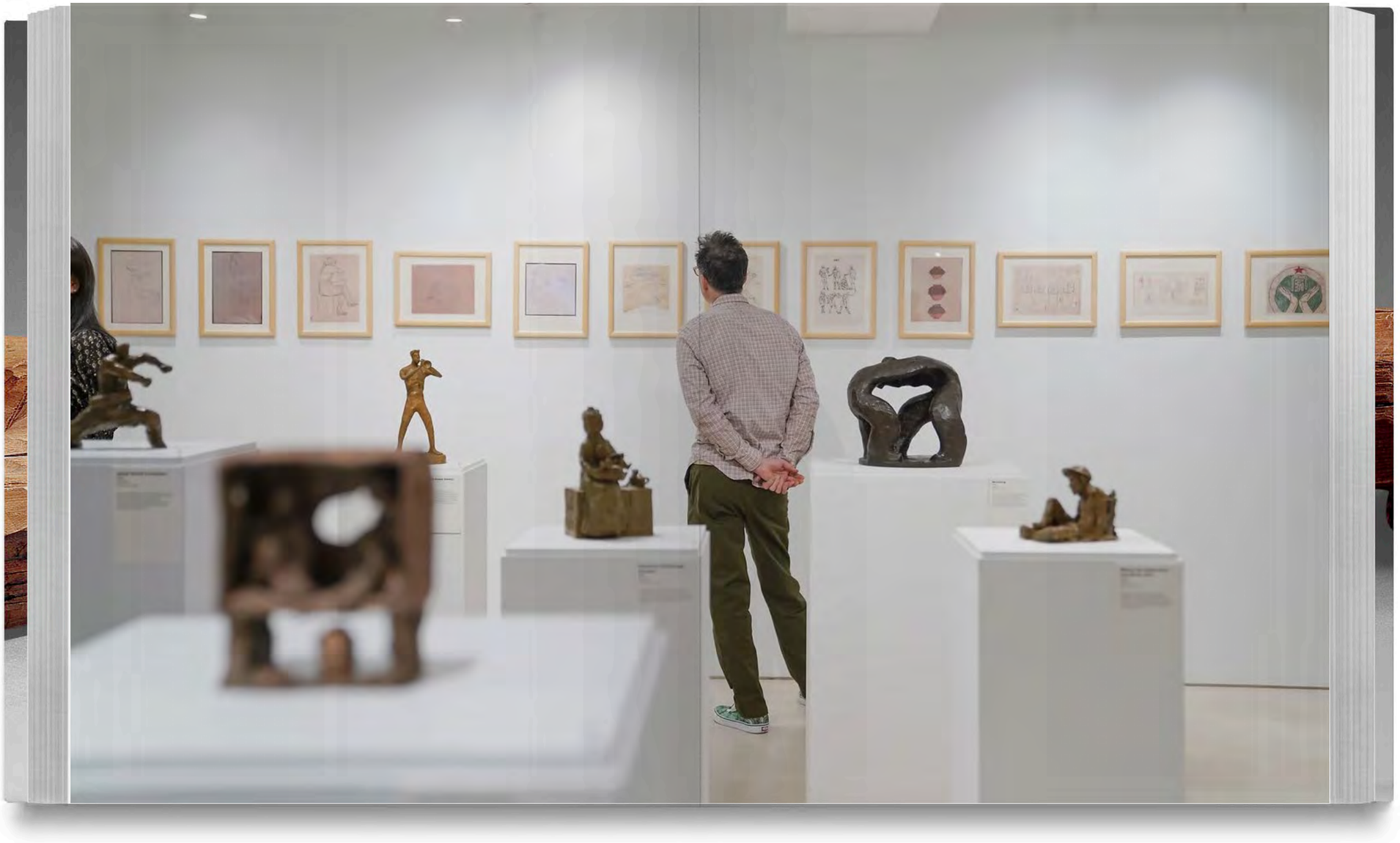

Living in my era, my role is to document the changes in life,
using clay as my words to write the diary for ordinary people,
a form of recording history.

(LIU SHIMING, MANUSCRIPT P. 104)

PREFACE

Why Liu Shiming?

Though well respected in China, the sculptor, who died in 2010 at the age of 84, is only now beginning to win the wider recognition he deserves. Meanwhile, contemporary competitors are numberless, most of them Instagram-friendly, while art history tends to focus on towering names and indisputably major movements and events: Braque and Picasso inventing Cubism, Duchamp's readymades redefining art itself, Warhol's mind-bending Brillo Boxes, etc. So why examine an artist in the middle ground?

Perhaps, first, because that is where the vast majority of us live, trying to make sense of our lives and grateful for the occasional insight, release, or enrichment that visual art can bring us. Second, because the story of Liu Shiming reveals a great deal about the forces that have shaped postwar art worldwide . He was a man who sought to lead a simple life, dedicated entirely to art, in the midst of China's epochal, dangerously complex 20th-century social and political changes. The choices he made—to help create Socialist Realist monuments, to abruptly leave Beijing and wander for 13 years in the provinces, to trail a beautiful Henan opera singer from town to town, to eschew his academic training and adopt a humble folk style, to marry a widow with children, to return to the capital in order to restore artifacts in the National Museum of Chinese History, to accept a modest teaching post at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, to make a late body of work that fundamentally refutes his early commissions, to ignore both the commercial market and the sensationalist avant-garde, and above all to remain true to a humane credo, one of deep empathy for everyday people, when that faith was being traduced on one side and mocked on the other—all these decisions ultimately enabled him to attain
a mature art of deceptive simplicity. That hard-won moderation dramatically illuminates the extremes, be they political didacticism or bohemian elitism, exposing their innate duplicity and their limits.

It is, therefore, vitally important to study Liu Shiming in the context of his times, to fathom how he perceived, thought about, and felt his artistic mandate in the lived context of his own time and place. Much can be learned from the way his art and life-choices registered with his Chinese peers, both within the profession and in the general public.

Ceramics is an art of fire that is beyond human control.
Sometimes, even if they don’t break, cracks of fissures may appear,
and in such cases, I had to mend them.
It’s more about breaking than succeeding.

(LIU SHIMING, MANUSCRIPT P. 119)

Suspicions and viciousness could fall on virtually anyone, including Liu's father, who was again regarded as suspect due to his former engineering position and his foreign residencies decades earlier. By the time the apolitical, opera-loving man was exonerated years later, Liu Baoshan was too old to bother fighting the lies . Some of Liu Shiming's fondest memories would be of spending a month annually, during the Chinese New Year period, with his aging father in the old family home in Tianjin. Yet when Liu Baoshan died in 1983, officials allowed only one-fourth of the customary funerary music to be played, because he was still deemed "unworthy" of full commemoration.

The artist's own fate during this dangerous period was relatively mild. Working in provincial Zhengzhou as the Red Guard madness ran its course in 1966-68, he seems to have been unmolested. Then in 1969 he was sent for "thought reform" to the Daizhai Township portion of the Juqi Forest Farm in Minquan County, Henan. Given his worsening mobility problem, he was probably assigned to work that was not too arduous, but he did have to put up with communal living conditions with other displaced culturati, among them Ding Zhegui, Liang Bingqian, Ma Jiguang, Ye Tongxuan, Wang Bangyan, Ding Zhongyi, Liu Tiehua, Wang Rubo, Qiu Guangzheng, and Wang Wei. Liu calmly went along with the program:

We studied daily, tended to the vegetable garden, engaged in criticism sessions, played chess, and shared past life experiences while working there. During this time, I interacted more with elderly teachers, shared meals and accommodations, and learned to sing model operas together. Beijing said we should fully embrace the ideology reformation, root ourselves in rural life, and refrain from inquiring about returning to the city. However, we all yearned to return to the town. . . .

During a reflection session, I admitted that many of my interests and beliefs had been mistaken because they were influenced by feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism. Anything I disliked or felt uncomfortable with was absolutely correct and aligned with the correctness of ideology reformation. Over the ten years in Henan, my worldview underwent a considerable transformation. I developed a sense of empathy and closeness to peasants and workers, allowing me to adopt a more egalitarian perspective. These experiences and the images of these activities have been a constant presence in my creative work.

Two decades later, he would recollect the Juqi Forest Farm experience in two small private sculptures. Tiehua Going for Noodles depicts a complacent-looking Liu Tiehua, a noted printmaker from the Kaifeng Normal College, clutching a pipe in his teeth as he walks a bicycle, presumably on his way to pick up noodles for his colleagues. Reeducation, though equally benign, is more rustic. In a small, elevated, three-sided shelter, squat two male figures—one a farmer, the other a bespectacled "intellectual" who no doubt has been sent down to learn from this local font to folk wisdom. With holes in the three walls around them, they gaze out of the open front, probably onto a field or a patch of forest. Despite the doctrine of the era, they do not appear to share any deep rapport. They are more like two isolate selves cast in the same bleak place, like Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon eternally waiting for Godot —or, in this case, the end of the Cultural Revolution. For Liu, release came without fanfare: "Finally, we saw large trucks in the countryside gradually removing our wooden beds and belongings, signaling it was time to return."

In the spring of 1970, Liu Shiming got permission to return to Beijing for a home rest. He had begun to miss the city and his old circle of family members, former schoolmates, neighbors, and friends. Fortunately, in 1971 he was officially transferred to the Baoding Mass Culture and Art Museum in Hebei, the province that enwraps the municipality of Beijing, making his visits much easier and more frequent. He directed the museum's community art program and worked on the Rent Collection Courtyard replica. (One might think of contemporary artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook showing full-scale reproductions of European masterpieces to Thai villagers.) Again he was fundamentally alone, in a town often described as "one road, two flagpoles, three buses." (The characterization lingered, although clearly outdated. The population of Boading in 1971 was 342,336.) He ate in cheap restaurants and listened wistfully, in his empty office in the early mornings, to the vocal exercises of an unseen opera singer. As a senior team member, he was given a solo studio of the type known as a "small square kettle." The contemplative privacy by a lotus pond pleased him so much that he

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Liu Shiming 刘士铭 (1926-2010)

"In order to create, I observe and remember things carefully. My eyes, like the lens of a camera, constantly capture images as I move through daily life. I store these images as memories, like negatives, in the film stockpile that is my mind."

Liu Shiming is a revered Chinese artist whose works have had a distinct impact on the course of modern Chinese sculpture. Born in Tianjin in 1926, Shiming attended the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing where he was part of the first generation of sculptors trained by the People's Republic of China to study both traditional Chinese art and French modernist principles. Receiving early recognition for his work, Shiming's student project, Measuring Land (1950), was one of the first works exhibited abroad following the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

Liu Shiming led a quietly remarkable life. After graduating from CAFA with honors, Liu worked on monumental and heroic sculptures, gaining increasin g recognition for his creativity and vision. Yet, just ten years after graduation, he made a radical change. Leaving fame and privilege behind, he moved to the countryside of Henan and Hebei provinces where he lived simply in small towns and villages. Here he observed and engaged with local people, following their customs and learning their folklore. It was during this period that he developed and honed his signature humanist style, honoring his cultural heritage while at the same time adapting more modern influences.

After returning to Beijing in 1975, he worked at the National Museum of Chinese History where he mastered clay and bronze reproduction and restoration techniques, deepening his knowledge and enhancing his love and respect for traditional Chinese art. Handling these ancient sculptures and relics significantly influenced his philosophy on art, supporting his belief in the importance of retaining our heritage while also being alive to the contemporary world.

In 1980 he returned to work at CAFA, where he managed a small electric kiln, providing him with enormous freedom to create his unique clay works. But it wasn't until 1994 when he became an inaugural member of The Chinese Sculpture Institute that he began to exhibit his sculpture; he received including solo exhibitions at such major museums as the National Art Museum in Beijing and the Henan Art Museum.

Liu Shiming continued to create and exhibit his sculpture in China until his death in 2010. Less than decade later,

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…the highest state of art creation is to be unrestrained,
fearless, selfless, and playful. Only when playing is the artist
at the most relaxed, natural, and authentic;
and thereby emotions may flow out freely.

(LIU SHIMING, MANUSCRIPT P.159)

Loreum Ipsom hough wthe sculptor, who died in 1967

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Liu Shiming Artist Bio

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Liu Shiming continued to create and exhibit his sculpture in China until his death in 2010. Less than a decade later, Liu's sculpture began to be shown outside of China, appearing in public spaces and special exhibitions, notably at the Oculus in New York City and the Asian Cultural Center in Washington DC. More recently, he has shown in university galleries and museums throughout the US and Canada,

with exhibitions planned for Europe in the next year.
His works are in the permanent collections of the American University in Cairo, Egypt; Czech National Museum in Prague; Georgia State University, Atlanta; Henan Art Museum, Zhengzhou, China; Macaulay Honors College in New York City; and the National Art Museum of China and the National Museum of Chinese History in Beijing. In 2025 a large scale sculpture is scheduled for installation on Roosevelt Island in New York City.

The Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing established the Liu Shiming Sculpture Museum in 2018, honoring his legacy and the historical significance of his works. In the Spring of 2024 the Liu Shiming Art Gallery opened in midtown Manhattan, dedicated to presenting the artist's work through both thematic and chronological exhibitions, and creating dialogue with other artists who work in the same or similar traditions.

Selection from Provinces Chapter

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Liu, long adrift in the provinces and occasionally ferrying back and forth to Beijing, came to have a fascination with China's two greatest rivers and their traditional watercraft. In the decades ahead he would make multiple Boats—many of them rafts really—marked by a respect for their crude but ingenious construction and a nostalgia for their isolated, close-knit crews and families: *Boatman on the Yellow River (1990), Wooden Raft on the Yangtze River (2004), Fisherwoman Going Home (1980), Roaring River Rushing East (1989), Family on the River (1989)*, and many more. Given Liu's exposure to Russian sources, we might immediately associate this theme with a famed example of Itinerant art, Ilya Repin's painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870-73)*. Yet Repin's bedraggled and dispirited haulers, strapped like workhorses to the heavy cargo boat they must lug upstream, differ significantly from Liu's calmly engaged, sometimes relaxed and chatty boat people who seem to drift with the current.

The details bespeak a genuine regard for this way of life; we see the particulars of the riders' clothing, the barrels and pots that they freight, the ropes coiled on deck or secured with nautical knots. These poignant works, many of them now displayed on a river of sand at the Liu Shiming Sculpture Museum in Beijing, combine a sense of the endurance of simple everyday life amid the slow sweep of time and history—one of the great themes of traditional Chinese art, epitomized in masterpieces like the boat-strewn Qing Dynasty scroll painting *Ten Thousand Li up the Yangtze River (1699)* by Wang Hui. One thinks, too, of the American painter Thomas Cole's famous series of four allegorical paintings *The Voyage of Life*, depicting a single male figure, alone in a boat on a river, passing through a wilderness from one stage of a lifetime to another: childhood, youth, manhood, and old age.

Liu Shiming (1926-2010)

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 – Liu Shiming: Life, Death & In-between, Eisentrager-Howard Gallery, Lincoln, NE, USA
- 2024 – Half the Sky, Liu Shiming Art Gallery, New York, NY, USA
- 2024 - From the Beginning, Liu Shiming Art Gallery, New York, NY, USA
- 2024 - Liu Shiming: Spirit of Daily Life, Queen's University, Ontario, Canada
- 2023 - In the Heart of the Bronze: A Liu Shiming Experience, artLAB gallery at Western University, Ontario, Canada
- 2023 - Liu Shiming: Life Gives Beauty Form, Mason Gross Galleries at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
- 2022 - Liu Shiming: Carving An Identity, Liu Shiming Art Foundation, New York, NY, USA
- 2022 - Liu Shiming: Descending the Mountain Together, Margie E. West Gallery at University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA
- 2022 - Cutting Through Mountains to Bring Water: The Sculptures of Liu Shiming, Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design Galleries at Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA
- 2022 - Passages: Sculpture by Liu Shiming, Godwin-Ternbach Museum at Queens College, New York, USA
- 2022 - Sculpting the Chinese Spirit: Vitality in Stillness, RIVAA Gallery, New York, USA
- 2019-2020 - Liu Shiming: A Chinese Original, The Oculus, World Trade Center, New York, NY, USA
- 2019-2020 - Souls in the Clay: Liu Shiming's Sculpture, CAFA, Beijing, China
- 2019 - Kindness Expresses Truth and Love: Liu Shiming's Sculpture, Asian Fusion Gallery, Washington D.C., USA
- 2019 - Departure and Return: Liu Shiming's Sculpture, Asian Cultural Center, New York, USA
- 2008 - Dream Back Home: Liu Shiming's Solo Exhibition of Sculptures, Henan Art Museum, China
- 2006 - Liberal Wormwood—Liu Shiming's Solo Exhibition of Sculptures, National Art Museum, Beijing, China
- 2005 - Indigenous Sculptures: Liu Shiming Solo Exhibition, CAFA, Beijing, China

Selected Public Collections

- American University, Cairo, Egypt
- Baoding Municipal Government, Hebei, China
- Beijing Shijingshan Sculpture Park, China
- Czech National Museum, Czech Republic
- Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- Henan Art Museum, Zhengzhou, China
- Liu Shiming Sculpture Museum, Beijing, China
- Macaulay Honors College, New York, USA
- Military Museum of The Chinese People's Revolution, Beijing, China
- Ministry of Culture, China
- National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China
- National Centre for the Performing Arts, Beijing, China
- National Museum of China, Beijing, China
- National Museum of Chinese History, China
- Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, New York, USA

Liu Shiming
Sculpting Empathy

By Richard Vine

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Lavishly illustrated with 73 color images

Liu Shiming

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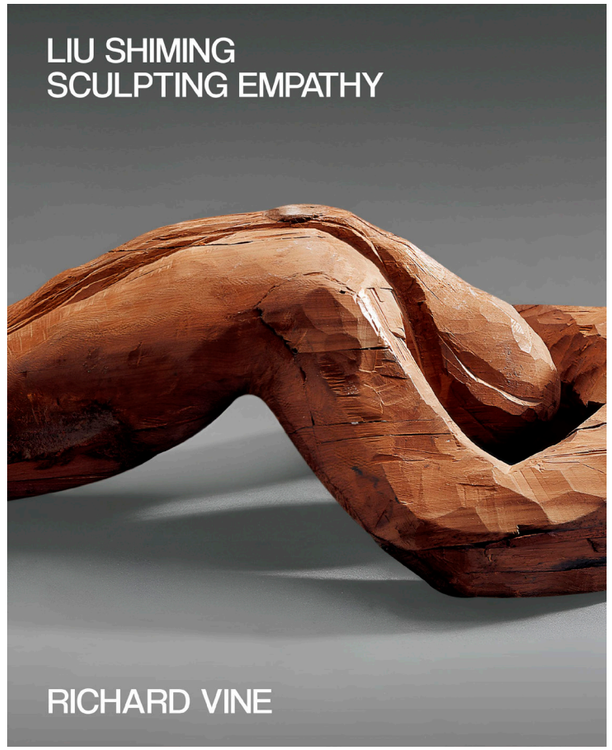

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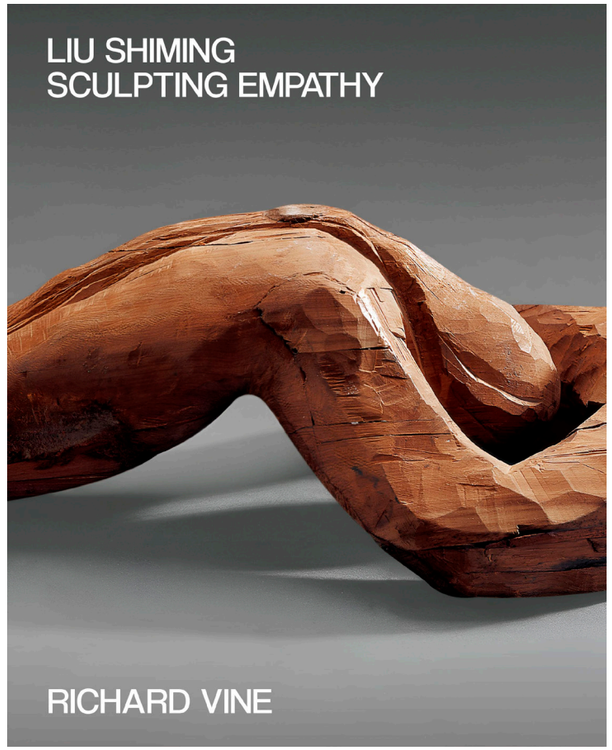

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