

### 53. Luo Jianwu 羅建武 (b. 1944)

“Clear, Wonderous, Ancient, Strange” 清奇古怪, 2005-2013

Hanging scroll, ink on paper  
621.0 x 74.3 cm. (244 1/2 x 29 1/4 in.)

Inscription: “Begun painting eight years ago, now finally completed, by the seventy-year-old elderly man Luo Jianwu.”

Six seals of the artist:

1. *Luo Jianwu* (bottom right)
2. *Sui han hou diao* (bottom left)
3. *Cheng huai* (top right)
4. *He luo* (top left)
5. *Cha chi* (lower right)
6. *Cong mu suo hao* (upper left)



The New York Times art critic Holland Cotter, in writing about the first Kaikodo exhibition in which a painting by Luo Jianwu was included, observed that “in the right, imaginative hands, how adventurous the pursuit of tradition can be.”\* Luo bases his work on both what he sees in nature and on traditional historical models, especially the great 16th century Ming master Wen Zhengming, who, like Luo, seems to have embraced a passion for trees.

Cotter described Luo's work as “tonally layered, minutely detailed” and “taking years to produce.” Luo is among those precious few contemporary artists who have not compromised for the market. Rather than rushing to fill a demand, Luo creates according to his own clock; the present painting engaged the artist for no fewer than eight years--a long time for a Chinese painting to reach completion; a very short time for a tree to grow, mature and age. What the artist has presented in his painting is such a tree, though, despite the stasis of the completed work, the tree portrayed does not strike us as a static entity. This is due to the dynamism of Luo's brushwork, and the dramatic nature of the forms born through brush and ink. The image recalls Dureresque engravings in its intricacy and fluency of linework and the multitudinous colors of ink. At the same time the brushwork is such that it appears as if filaments of iron had been pulled into naturalistic patterns and forms by some great creative magnate. Trunk and branches twist, coil, and writhe, producing a powerful kinetic energy that brings to mind the mighty dragon to which Luo, following in the footsteps of the 16th-century Ming-dynasty painting master Wen Zhengming, likens his pines and cypresses. On the other hand, the woody masses seem to flow like molten lava, and where it has cooled and solidified, life is given to leafy forms. The tree, then, can be viewed as a landscape, one unto itself, isolated and discreet. We traverse it, exploring its peaks and valleys, its outcroppings and crevices. However we look at it, we are struck by a unified, perfectly realized image, and wonder at the artist's vision, his relentless pursuit, and that touch of magic that brought everything together in the end.

Luo was born in Wusheng, Sichuan province in 1944, as the Japanese army advanced across China. In Taiwan, where the family was able to relocate when he was five-years old, he

eventually had an opportunity to study not only traditional Chinese painting but Western styles of painting and drawing as well. Emigrating to the USA in 1987, Luo lived and worked in New York City where C.C. Wang (1907-2003), the well-known painter-collector-dealer, gave him access to his collection of great Chinese paintings of the past and where even Central Park provided a window to the nature essential for Luo's painting. While regularly visiting Beijing since 1989, Luo, the one time graphic artist and fashion designer and presently teacher, calligrapher, painter, and tea master, made that city his permanent residence in 2008. Beijing and its environs are the homes of venerable rocks and trees that continue to inspire Luo in his work.

Luo's paintings are in the collections of the Portland Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the University Museums at Harvard and Princeton, and in private collections in Asia and the USA.

\*The Kaikodo exhibition entitled "Ten" was on view in November 2001. Holland Cotter's comments appeared in *The New York Times*, November 30, 2001.