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Wen Hsi and his Art

There is no longer any doubt that China needs to be revolutionised in order to keep up with the times. The question, however, is this: what principles should underscore this revolution, and how should they be implemented in order to get the best results? For example, a great majority of the self-acclaimed artists of the Lingnan School (岭南画派) have acquired the island-country flavour of Japan. They pursue appearance over inner substance and emphasise the play of colours over rhythmic effects. The resulting works lack depth and strength. Their inability to express the unique personality and character of the Chinese people is detested by many. We shall not elaborate any further. There are also those who comb the detritus of older artists, using leftover ideas and claiming these as their own — they actually regard this as a kind of self-transformation. And then there are those who steal ideas from Western art and expend their efforts on insignificant details such that their “work” amounts to nothing — they are also not worthy of further discussion.

Not only does Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希) avoid many of the above-mentioned flaws in his pursuit of personal innovation, he also has many outstanding merits. Although some of them are contentious, there have been achievements on the whole.

We first need to know that during his years at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校), Wen Hsi studied and practised depicting Western art postures. That was how he honed his skills for life drawing.

With his good drawing skills, Wen Hsi is able to explore a wide range of subject matter: flowers, birds, fish, insects, landscapes and figures. His paintings are realistic, lively and natural. His excellent use of colour captures nature delightfully, elevating one to a higher realm. He treats objective forms as tools for expressing the subjective spirit. In doing so, he has fulfilled the highest duty in art academia. In short, these results come from the artist’s willingness to face reality and capture the ever-changing natural forms, for if one were to close the doors and face empty walls, one would learn nothing, not even in ten thousand years!

What is the secret of Chinese ink painting? Ingenious strokes of ink on paper have an infinite expression of rhythm. Not only is Chinese ink painting different from Western art, it also varies from the ink traditions of the other cultures of the Orient. This unique difference is a major asset to Singapore art. Therefore, ink painting here should be further developed with attention to materials and tools, and not just techniques. Wen Hsi likes to use traditional colours and materials for some of his works. This naturally enhances the unique flavour of certain themes. However, this method should not be used too often as only pure white rice paper is capable of bringing out the magnificence of large strokes of paint. When used too liberally, colour impedes the rhythmic flow of the ink, which in turn degrades the quality of the artwork. In order to stay true to the way things appear in real life, adding minimal colours will do little harm, but it is still best to keep the painting simple and profound. Avoid using white pigment on white rice paper. The pigment’s texture is non-transparent and has the tendency to smudge. If the use of white pigment is prohibited in Western watercolour painting, how much more so for a superior art like Chinese ink painting!

A work of art is not considered complete based on shape and colour alone. It requires substance of content. Similarly, an artist should not be satisfied with just possessing good skills. He should have the right awareness and the desire to manage his creativity. Based on the above criteria, let us examine Wen Hsi’s art. We notice that apart from his expertise in drawing, Wen Hsi has transcended mere aestheticism. He has slowly moved his brush towards expressing the faces of society and varied human lives, such as the movements in a village, meetings and separations on the streets, and young ladies from the southern countries. Take his small painting which shows a group of vagabonds who have lost their homes and families. They are suffering from hunger and waiting for small donations from benefactors. Such scenes of gloominess and desolation are the stark realities of present-day China. We live far away, but who among us would not feel sad at such a sight? It is not easy to paint such a scene using traditional Chinese ink painting techniques and materials, but Wen Hsi has succeeded in doing so. This is a strong inspiration to our next generation of artists to press forth. At the same time, I hope Wen Hsi will continue to press forth. The future of Chinese art shall start here!

ENDNOTES

1 The title of this work is 《待赈》, which translates as awaiting alms.
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