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Commemorative Post-War Art Festival

This is the second year of the Commemorative Post-War Art Festival. I remember when we first celebrated the art festival on the third of March; there was confusion about the dates on the calendar. Looking back, we can see that the mistake was caused by a lack of communication between the overseas art circles and our motherland [China].

Subsequently, artists arrived one after another from China and introduced Chinese cultural and historical artefacts to us. During this period, the art world naturally felt some impact. However, the impact was like a drop in the ocean and did not last long. Everything quietened down and returned to a depthless silence. There are two reasons for this: works by the foreign artists lack content and are childish, and local artists are not studying hard enough. This is a tragedy.

It is a miserable fact that there were a total of 12 large and small art exhibitions in Singapore last year, with an average of one a month. This is miserable. Of the 12 exhibitions, six were by European artists and five were by artists from China. Only one exhibition, the Seventh Annual National Day Art Exhibition, was organised by the local art community. This is regrettable!

Putting aside the exhibitions by Western artists and looking at our brothers and sisters: at every art exhibition, there is usually pomp and publicity. There is no promotion of the basic nature of art but a pursuit of material possession. Even the Shanghai School (海派) which was disdained in the past is more highly regarded than us here on the equator — this is a greater tragedy.

Most importantly, it is up to us to expend blood and sweat to work on this barren garden for it to flourish again.

Singapore is known as a metropolis with its population of one million people, of which at least 70 percent are Chinese. However, there are only a dozen artists, and the number of art organisations can be counted with the fingers of one hand. If we compare ourselves with the four million people and 300,000 artists in Paris, the proportion is too pathetic and laughable. In addition, most of our artists are amateurs of various kinds: the first, who invites a couple of friends when he is at leisure to go to the suburbs to relax and paint, is rare enough; the second kind — the prevalence of whom I dare not think about — can go for years without touching brush or paper. There is yet another kind who, unforgivably, merely engages in the act of painting without recognising themselves as part of a larger cultural endeavour. They are unable to think critically or dedicate themselves to contemplating, studying, or promoting the arts. A prime reason for this is their lack of proper instruction and cultivation, things that cannot be attained instantly.

The most pressing issues are the need to increase the number of art exhibitions, which is easy, and to improve the quality of the artworks, which is much less so. While the internal causes for the lack of quality have been detailed above, the problem must be met with external impetuses — a strict and fair system of art criticism. As it has been from past to present, an absolutely objective point of view is notoriously hard to achieve, whether in the East or West. This is especially true when it comes to art appreciation, which cannot be carried out with reductive yardsticks. It is even harder to ensure that there is no bias, but if we proceed cautiously we should succeed.

Looking at the different places in the world, we witness the brilliance of art everywhere. Europe was once a scene of devastation. Bread was rationed and there was hardly any fish for the people. However, large-scale art exhibitions ran successively and many talents and artworks were discovered. Collections of works by ancient and modern masters, including colour prints, were produced more exquisitely than they had been before the war. The United States may be defined by a material culture, but its increasing savvy in spending its money suggests that the country is in fact more than just a naive dandy: its government has a team of experts just to acquire great art, old and new. Let us not talk of older works — they are more than willing to fork out US$100,000–US$200,000 for a work by Picasso. No wonder some say that present-day Americans have developed class and taste. No matter what, in cities such as New York and Chicago, you can now see masterpieces by Titian [Tiziano Vecellio], Francisco Goya, Jean-François Millet, Auguste Rodin and Aristide Maillol. We need only read their daily magazines and newspapers
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for weekly detailed introductions of renowned artworks for us to respect their determination to aspire to greater heights.

It is a pity we cannot tell when the chaotic situation in our motherland will settle down. After the war, there was a lengthy clamour for a national art exhibition. Today, it is still an empty dream.

This commemorative publication aims to assume the responsibility of giving life to art in this desolate island country, but can it? Only time will tell.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to friends who have helped directly, especially the few who have contributed their views to the publication.

Sunyee and her Art

No one can deny the statement that art is a lofty occupation; to say that it is a well-paying one, though, is not necessarily true. Even though a famous piece of art from the Tang and Song dynasties has been valued at several hundreds of thousands of dollars, and a work by Pablo Picasso has been sold for several tens of thousands of sterling pounds, these are partly due to historical value and the artist’s genius in technique. Who among most artists has not struggled to make ends meet? Destiny rarely smiles on artists. Does art have to be treated with indifference from now on? No. Never! The hardships in life may have reduced artists’ material comforts, but they can never suppress the desire for artistic creativity. It is because of this sheer enthusiasm that the culture of mankind is sustained and carried forward. Historically, the people that have shouldered this task have mostly been male; noteworthy women are extremely rare.

Sunyee (沈雁) is precisely one of these rare women.¹

She is outwardly refined and inwardly intelligent: lively and quick-witted, fluent yet reserved, noble and pure in spirit, she has great ambitions.

More than ten years ago, Sunyee graduated from an art academy in Shanghai. Not satisfied, she went to Japan and studied in Tokyo for three years. Still unsatisfied, she simply flew to faraway Europe and toured Paris, the world’s art capital; Rome, where ancient achievements stand; Spain, the country of songs; and London, the congregating point for cultural artefacts. She explored their endless treasures and was richly nourished. She studied intensively the meticulous and outstanding compositions of past masters, and viewed in detail the new styles of famous contemporary artists. She never adored them blindly, treating them instead with critical appreciation.

At the same time, Sunyee picked up her brush and painted in situ. The splendour of the fog over the River Thames, the coquettish dancers in Casablanca, the ancient ruins of Italy, and the magnificence of the Palace of Versailles have all come to life in her hands. Such a method of studying and painting on the spot has greatly advanced her artistic progress. It has also cautioned her against slackening. In her pursuit of the origins

ENDNOTES

1 The author probably wrote this essay as a foreword for the Post-War Art Festival’s commemorative magazine.