of Western art theories, Sunyee also studied Western literature for a more thorough understanding. She was determined to compare them with the special characteristics of Oriental culture and extract a middle path to guide her. As she was educated in the motherland [China], the great and profound Chinese nature already resided deep within her. Her sojourn in Japan offered her the flavour of another branch of Oriental culture. It is most appropriate for her to harmonise her exposure to the different cultures.

Presently, Sunyee’s art on the whole is typical of Post-Impressionism. She employs swift strokes, strong colours and unusual subjects, displaying a determined poise. A few paintings of lotuses are powerful and unusually bold, and are in fact Fauvist. The few paintings of birds have exceptional compositions, youthful tones, and richly decorative touches. They are the kind of work that Orientals should produce and are worthy of praise. Naturally, these works are not Sunyee’s achievements at her peak, but are records in the course of her studies. She once said that whenever she finishes an artwork, she immediately feels dissatisfied and wants to start painting a better piece. This reveals her modest attitude towards learning. At the same time, as she improves over the course of time, each artwork also becomes superior to the previous one. To never stand still is the symbol of an artistic life full of great potential. With Sunyee’s firm foundation in sketching and excellent artistic self-cultivation, it is most certain that she will find a place in the international art circle. Let us wait and see!

ENDNOTES
1 Sun (沈) is her surname.
dance and opera, among others. These three broad categories may encompass a wide area, but if we talk only of the fine arts, the scope becomes much narrower. Fine art is what the human eye can see, that is, “visual art.”

We have just defined the arts and its categories. Now, let us talk about the relationship between the arts and life.

We know that the most fundamental aim in life is to survive. If that drive for survival is absent, one will simply perish. With death it becomes useless to speak of life and, concomitantly, meaning or purpose.

It is precisely in order to survive that humanity has two fundamental desires. The first is appetite for food because when we are hungry, our ability to function will be weak. The other is carnal desire, which is commonly referred to as the relationship between a man and a woman. It is because humankind has to preserve his race that man must have this drive.

The two desires which we have just spoken about have created the most basic criteria for survival. Yet, these two most basic criteria are humankind’s most inferior desires because animals also possess these appetites. Thus, in Man’s quest for survival these two are not adequate, and he has turned to a special, nobler desire — that of “creating culture.”

Culture is essentially a very abstract thing. If we had to concretise it, we might say that it encompasses every human activity.

We can again classify humankind’s noble desire to create culture into three categories: desire for knowledge, desire for morality, and desire for beauty. In the desire for knowledge, man seeks truth and the subject of study is natural science. In the desire for morality, man seeks compassion and the subject of study is the social relationship between people. In the desire for beauty, man seeks beauty and the subject of study is the creative arts. The three desires of humankind — truth, compassion and beauty — have different goals, but they ultimately come back to beauty. In other words, truth and compassion are the means by which cultural activities are carried out. Beauty is the final goal. Thus, we can conclude that the best and most beautiful cultural achievements are concentrated in the arts. If we wish to examine the cultural standards of a country, an ethnic group, a society, or an individual, we need only begin with the people of that place or their understanding of the arts. This is because the arts are the final aim of humankind’s activities. Perhaps you might think I am selling my own wares because I study the arts and would naturally emphasise the value of the arts above all others. Hence, here are a few facts to prove my point.

Let us begin by talking about the history of China. Chinese history has seen glory and decay because the culture of each dynasty was different. For example, the Tang Dynasty was the most powerful period in Chinese history because of its flourishing artistic atmosphere. Many people were talented in the arts and the artistic achievements were great. This shows clearly that artistic standards were high and, in turn, so were cultural standards. The higher a nation’s cultural standards, the stronger it is. The artistic achievements of the Tang Dynasty were highly regarded not only by the Chinese but also by the West.

Let us now look at the history of the West. In Western ancient history, the third to sixth century was marked by the unmatched flourishing of Greece. This is because the Greeks also had a high regard for the arts. The Olympic Games, for example, originated in Greece. Most people have the mistaken view that the Greeks’ purpose for these games was simply to promote sports and train physical strength, which was not the case. The real objective was to develop beautiful physiques. The developed physique must of course meet the criteria of “beauty,” or their aspirations would be meaningless. Hence their intention was built upon the concept of beauty. If the world lacked beauty, life would be so dull!

We saw the truth this time when China sent representatives to compete in the London Olympic Games. They returned empty-handed. They failed because they did not match the beautiful physiques of the participants from other countries. Hence, China deserved
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failure in the Olympic Games. Otherwise it would have been an injustice to the participants with more beautiful physiques!

We have digressed. Now, let us return to the basic theme — the relationship between the arts and life.

We have said: humankind needs to have the three noble desires of truth, compassion, beauty, and the ability to create culture so as to differentiate itself from animals. The relationship between the arts and life can again be classified into the realms of personal relationships, social relationships, national relationships, and global relationships. Now, let us discuss them separately.

The arts and its relationship with people: life is inseparable from the needs of clothing, food, shelter, and travel. The original objective of clothing is to cover the body and protect it from the cold, yet we are particular about the colours of the material, the fit of the tailoring, and the trendiness of the style. The original objective of eating is to fill our stomachs, but we insist on laying a clean table cloth on the dining table and placing some flowers on it, even paying attention to the types of cutlery and crockery we use. Shelter was initially meant only for us to rest and sleep, but we insist on beautifying the buildings according to the “Greco style,” “Roman style,” and others, even to the extent of hanging artworks by famous artists and displaying antiques, pianos, radio sets, and other furnishings. Motor travel was initially meant for us to move faster to save time, but most people are not satisfied with having cars to travel around, and require their cars to have pleasing colours and impressive exteriors.

These, in summary, are founded on the pursuit of the “enjoyment of beauty.” Having artworks and pianos in the house is precisely the expression of man’s pursuit of a higher degree of aesthetic enjoyment. This is because the colours, techniques and styles of valuable artworks can stimulate our senses and soothe a day’s toil and tiredness. A painting that depicts war can instil bravery in man, subtly adding to his zest for life. Listening to music such as Beethoven’s *Eroica* or *Choral* can heighten our emotions and endow us with the vitality to face up to harsh realities and forge ahead bravely. When listening to Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* or Chopin’s nocturnes and polonaises, we can be completely freed from the tiredness, troubles and frustrations within us. This then illustrates the power of the arts to motivate and console. These forces, however, are unseen and exist within us. As a result, only those who are sufficiently educated and refined will feel them.

The arts and their relationship with a society: art can redirect a society’s preferences. In the past, the typical living habits of the literati in China leaned towards an aimless and subdued state. This is because the arts in China then tended to be unreal and detached. As a result, they imbued the common people with an inclination towards decadence and depression, like the 19th and early 20th centuries in the West, when materialism peaked and revealed man’s bondage to material things. It is only natural that when these excesses reached an extreme, an opposing reaction developed. There was then an artist in France, Paul Gauguin, who saw that development and greatly detested the putrefied state of the society. He escaped to a tiny island in the Pacific Ocean and lived with the indigenous inhabitants of the island. His view on art primarily revolved around a return to nature. At the same time, he believed that the way to save society was by revolutionising the arts. He was not fearful of any dangers and challenges in fulfilling his ideals and ambitions. He was in the company of the islanders day and night, and used the island’s natural surroundings and life as subjects to portray an innocent and primordial state. Later, when he brought his paintings back to Paris, they caused a stir. Hence, the Parisian social atmosphere was influenced by his paintings and gradually recovered from states of putrefaction, lust, and depression, returning to innocence and simplicity.

Then there was the Dark Ages before the Renaissance. Art was created under the instruction and influence of the Church. Almost all the paintings depicted the Virgin Mary and Jesus. Poets and musicians sang about God. Thereafter, a group of artists emphasised individual expression, releasing the minds of humankind from the shackles of religion and enabling each person to recognise the importance of his character and status. This is an impressive discovery of a humanistic truth in the realm of Western history. They used the strength of the arts to rescue man from darkness and, at the same time, actively promoted the revival of the ancient Greco culture. This was the genesis of modern
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The arts and their relationship with the people of a country: people do not live alone. They form societies and countries. Yet, the relationship between the arts and a country is the same as that between art and the individual. We know that China has existed for thousands of years despite short periods of foreign invasion and rule, such as during the Jin, Yuan and Qing dynasties, because she is a rich well of culture and the arts, and has been able to assimilate the foreign races. Actually, the assessment of the strength of a country or its people cannot be based on merely economics, military might and politics because these are just temporary phenomena. Only art and culture are permanent, and cannot be eradicated! In other words, only artistic culture can show the true strength of a country.

The arts and their relationship with the world: in the history of humankind, there has not been a single year without war. It seems that at almost every moment, there is war, differing only in scale. Wars are started because of humankind’s desire for material goods. Because this desire is insatiable, humankind cannot help but use violence to obtain the lands and riches of others. It is inevitable that various arguments and conflicts are started that gradually expand into full-scale wars.

As everyone knows, wars are absolutely cruel. They do not speak of humanity. Since time immemorial, countless cultural establishments have been destroyed [by war]. I believe no human welcomes war. Why then are wars not being eliminated? It stands to reason that people are unable to interact through artistic cultures. In all of humankind’s “forms of consciousness,” only the arts are international and borderless. They are an expression of a common human spirit. Hence, it is only when the nationalities of the world unite through art that war can be completely eradicated. This is, presumably, a distant hope. When will it be realised? Just when will we achieve the aim of an ideal permanent peace? This will depend on how quickly people get around to the idea of cultural exchange. Artistic cultures are continuously evolving and improving, and many artists are quietly working on seeking permanent peace through the exchange of artistic cultures. I believe permanent peace can be achieved in the near future.

Summing up all that I have said earlier, artistic culture is of great importance to life. Hence, we should actively study and promote artistic culture. But how should we do that? I can now share with you the many years of experience of my friends who have worked passionately for artistic culture, as well as mine.

We feel that encouraging the spirit of studying the arts would be especially difficult in the commercial society of Nanyang if we were to begin with the slightly older generation, who are too entrenched in their traditional beliefs and thoughts. Hence, if we are to work on this, we must actively nurture youths in artistic and cultural thinking. The minds of young people are still innocent, and when compared to the elderly are more passionate, determined and courageous. With a good learning environment and proper development, the aim of promoting artistic culture will not be hard to realise. All of you belong to the younger generation. If you work hard on developing the arts, I dare believe your future will be very hopeful.

Finally, as this is a girls’ school, I would like to talk a little about the contributions made by women to artistic cultures.

With regard to this, I first have to apologise because the contribution to the arts by women has been very small! In art history, we cannot find a female artist or sculptor. Perhaps this should be attributed to the insufficient energies of women and the domestic responsibilities they are saddled with. This unfortunate phenomenon has been caused by social policies and not because women have refused to work hard. Nevertheless, the female contribution to artistic culture in general cannot be neglected. We can see that great Western painters and sculptors past to present have used the beautiful female body as a subject in their creations. Although part of their success in the arts was due to their skilled techniques, a huge part
culture. All the cultures of the modern West — economics, politics, philosophy, science, morality — were at their crucial turning points during this era. Hence, we see again the power of the arts to redirect the social atmosphere. The famous artists then were Leonardo da Vinci, Sanzio Raphael and Michelangelo. Their achievements in the arts occurred at the zenith of the history of humankind.

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of it can be credited to the gracefulness of the female body and the elegance of its lines.

Apart from indirectly contributing their naturally beautiful bodies to art, women have also influenced artistic culture with their kind and gentle personality, giving male artists spiritual encouragement and sympathy, implicitly increasing their interest and labour in the arts. In general, almost all great artists, even philosophers and scientists, have been nurtured with feminine care. Successful artists often have loving mothers, sisters, female friends, and invariably, a gentle and loving wife, or lover. This sufficiently proves that the success of male artists is generally dependent on the love, protection and encouragement of women.

However, it is now the 20th century. Most women have been freed from the shackles of domesticity. As for “equality of the sexes,” we should not only compete for equality in economics and politics in society, but also work for equality in artistic creation. Hence, I hope that everyone here will contribute towards the future creation of the arts. If this cannot be achieved, at the very least support and encourage your siblings, husbands, or children. Then, the future path of Chinese artistic culture will be filled with promise!

I know that in the past and now, this school has seen many special talents in the arts and is also an active promoter of the fine arts. This is obvious just looking at the art facilities and the passion with which Principal Liew regards fine arts. I believe this is a very good sign that the seedlings of art have sprouted in the society of Nanyang. Furthermore, according to our statistics for the annual fine art exhibition held by the Society of Chinese Artists (中华美术研究会), your school boasts the most students visiting the exhibition. This shows that you have an unusually strong interest in the arts. I am filled with gratitude and admiration for Principal Liew’s passion for and promotion of the fine arts.

To end, I should apologise for having rambled on so much and tiring you for more than an hour in this dreary hot weather. I shall end the talk here. Thank you!

ENDNOTES

1 Liew Yuen Sien (刘韵仙) was the principal of Nanyang Girls’ High School from 1927 to 1966.