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Siew, Sara and Kang Liu.
The Art of Zhang Liying
[Georgette Chen]

This was more than 20 years ago.

It was autumn in Paris, a season brimming with artistic activity. Many artists had benefited much from their vacation during the long summer. Most of them had been busy. Some had been preparing for solo exhibitions, while others had participated in group exhibitions. The main art event during this period was the Salon d’Automne. The venue was Le Grand Palais, located in the heart of the city. The exhibition ran for the entire month of October. The main focus was on painting and sculpture, although the selected artworks had been categorised according to paintings, sculptures, architecture, decorative arts and stage design. It showcased thousands of artworks, from acclaimed contemporary artists to emerging artists, making it a complete and magnificent exhibition to behold. The event was launched, as it had always been, by the President of France. The ceremony was grand; it was attended by diplomats and leaders of the cultural community. My brother-in-law, Chen Jen Hao (陈人浩), and I exhibited our works annually from 1928 till we returned to Singapore in 1933.

During the 1930 exhibition, we became acquainted with Madam Zhang Liying (张荔英), who was one of the participating artists. She was young, lively, dignified and beautiful. Her spoken French was so beautiful it was like listening to a poem by Victor Hugo. Accompanying her was her husband, the influential and famous diplomat Chen Youren (陈友仁). They were enjoying their life as newlyweds and were rarely seen without each other. Madam Zhang once said that Chen Youren was the most beautiful man in the world and that was why she loved him. Indeed, his eyes looked gentle, but they were sharp in observing the world. His lips were red and luscious, but they showed unshakeable determination. His eyebrows revealed a dignified composure. The bridge of his nose outlined his selfless and upright character. A certain benevolence that showed on his face when he was conversing or deep in thought revealed him to be the embodiment of both firmness and gentleness. Madam Zhang was examining a person with the aesthetic measure of an artist. As long as the object fits the theoretical definition of beauty, it is a perfect piece of art. Who would not love such an excellent piece of art?

Madam Zhang’s artistic quest and perspective on aesthetics share the same standards. Regardless of subject matter, every line, contact, colour, and form has its special mission. For example, in Plum Blossoms (1953–1955) she paints intertwining lines in cold and grey tones, revealing extraordinary willpower. In Peking Scene (1940), she uses the winding form of the lofty tower and contrasting vibrant colours to bring out the majestic aura of the architecture. One glance at Madam Zhang’s Self Portrait (1946) and you will see that she is a frank person worthy of your friendship because you do not detect any sense of depression from the canvas. East Coast Vendor (1961), another iconic work of hers, gives a feeling of forthrightness because you do not feel any encumbrances within this complex composition. Every single line fits securely with others.

To attain the qualities mentioned above, one must have happy thoughts and proficient skills. Madam Zhang’s foundation skills are much practised. I have seen some of her works when they were only charcoal sketches in her studio. While colours had yet to be added, they already appeared substantial, demonstrating the usefulness of sketching, which is a practice no artist should overlook.

Madam Zhang was born in Paris and received a foreign education. She should have been very westernised in her thoughts and ways, but is not so. Her parents must have raised her well. We can be assured that she will create completely new compositions in the near future.

As for pottery, Madam Zhang has just started on it and has no major accomplishments. Nevertheless, this is a meaningful venture as pottery affects people’s lives. These daily implements are more directly related to people than oil paintings. If we wish to elevate people’s interest in art, it would be more effective if we adopted this approach. Famous European artists such as Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall, among others, have for many years been designing and making pottery, turning works of craft into artistic creations. Shapes and painted designs are expressed freely and not bound by any traditional habits. Thus, pottery-making becomes like pure art; not only is it of practical use, it also takes on an artistic character, offering the best of both worlds. This is a big revolution for the
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Trip to Bali

More than 20 years ago, movie star Charlie Chaplin expressed his thoughts after touring Southeast Asia, “Those who have not been to Bali cannot be considered as having been to Nanyang.”

When old Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès was young, he, like Paul Gauguin, travelled to the French island of Tahiti in the Pacific Ocean to experience the exotic ambience of a foreign culture. However, when he stopped over at Bali, he was intoxicated by its beautiful scenery and mesmerised by its romantic appeal. Although Le Mayeur continued towards his planned destination, his soul was already captivated by Bali’s poetic scenery. Not long after, he abandoned Gauguin’s beloved island and threw himself into the arms of this paradise on earth. He married the famous dancer Ni Pollok, concentrated on painting, and led a pure artistic life.

Another artist, Dutchman Rudolf Bonnet, has travelled to all the famous scenic spots in the world. However, his favourites are Rome, Beijing and Bali. He once hesitated for a long time when choosing the perfect work site from these three locations. In the end, he picked Bali.

Last year, a young Spanish artist visited Bali en route to other parts of the world. While touring Bali, he expressed his surprise and disbelief that such a warm and pure place could exist on earth. He abandoned the remaining 70 percent of his travel plans and stayed on in this paradise as a happy resident.

People might say that artists promote Bali as the sacred place of art due to their biased feelings and presumptuous views, and that this has little relevance to the average man! As a matter of fact, countless people from all over the world flock to Bali every year, and they do not all paint. Some obvious examples are the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia Malcolm MacDonald, and the President of the Philippines Elpidio Quirino, who visit Bali despite their busy schedules. It is common knowledge that the Indonesian President, Sukarno, goes to Bali for a short rest every holiday.

world of craft. Malaya’s natural resources are abundant and its wages are cheap. As long as someone is willing to undertake this mission, it would not be difficult to heighten people’s interest in art.

I wish Madam Zhang all the best.