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About Xu Beihong
[excerpt]

There was a side to Beihong’s personality that was hard to understand, as well as a side that was candid. In his art, there are veiled undercurrents as well as glorious clouds. For example, his painting of horses counts as his unique and outstanding achievement because he was able to master various Western painting techniques such as anatomy, perspective and proportion, and amalgamate the knack of ink and brush in traditional Chinese art. He painted horses with their heads lifted towards their backs, in groups or singly, and in various poses. He was also able to depict in detail the fine horses’ bravery and heroism, as well as them at leisure and other activities. Some race across open land while others rest in the woods, quenching their thirst. They are all life-like and emanate a majestic aura. Beihong applied his secret formula for painting horses to the depiction of other animals with much success. He was able to convey bestial vitality and disposition: the ferocity of lions and tigers, and the bravery and beauty of eagles and falcons all come alive on paper; the tameness of pigs and buffaloes, and the nimbleness of chickens, magpies and robins are simply mesmerising!

Beihong was a master of modern Chinese art, with prolific creations during his lifetime which outshone his peers. His masterpieces like Jiufanggao, the Connoisseur of Horses (九方皋), A Painting in the Spirit of Six Dynasties Poetry (六朝人诗意), Ba People Drawing Water (巴人汲水), The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains, and Awaiting the Deliverer satirised current affairs at times, and rallied patriotism at others. His smaller pieces of resting buffaloes, merry magpies, lazy cats, and flocks of pigeons are expressive. Beihong was also a practitioner in art education. He once chaired the National Central University’s Department of Art and National Beijing Art College (国立北平美术专科学校), and nurtured many of the country’s art talents. However, his style of teaching, from learning to creation, adhered strictly to perspectives of realism and did not give his students much room for free play. It was difficult for them to discover new frontiers, and in time, they declined and lost the momentum to progress. While we should not blindly pursue the latest trends, it remains true that all cultural activities constitute the history of humankind. Science, philosophy, politics, economics and habits of daily living are all in the midst of evolution and change. Art should be no exception.

Such persistence deserves mention. However, it is difficult to attend to everything in large scenes, thereby easily resulting in a loss of focus. One should be cautioned against this. Naturally, the main consideration is how one can create an atmosphere that befits the scale of the scene. One way of achieving this is to discard the details and retain the fundamental essence.

Kim Seng is less inhibited. Like a warrior advancing ahead of the times, he exhibits bold ambition in his choice of material, colour, style and stroke. Perhaps owing to his educational background, he can be headstrong at times. He will become more mature and strong after experiencing more hardships.

It is not a bad thing to learn art in Singapore, although vision and ambition are limited. Once we set our sights further and wider, we will create some miracles. Both Kong Chai and Kim Seng will soon be leaving for Paris for further studies. I wish them success and a bright future.
The 20th century is an important turning point in the history of humankind and also an opportunity for China’s culture to rise to a new level. The chaos of old and new ideas and the aspirations of various nationalities have fallen into unsettling times. On one hand, there are rosy illusions; on the other hand, bloodied realities. Beihong was situated in such circumstances. His innately simple and forthright nature was infected by the urban city’s superficiality. Hence, his behaviour and work, as well as his writing and painting, were repeatedly contradictory. People could only pardon, time and again, this complex and odd behaviour. Undoubtedly, he holds a venerated position in the domain of modern Chinese art. However, to worship him blindly would only obscure the truth. This should not be adopted by the learned. Objective judgement is the only path to deeper understanding, which is the purpose of this essay.

Beihong and I became acquainted when he held a fund-raising exhibition in Singapore and Malaya. We chatted frequently at Wong Man See’s “Studio of a Hundred Fans”, or at gatherings of fellow artists. When he held exhibitions in various parts of Malaya, we also toured and helped him, spending more time with him. In my view, he was a sincere and modest elder, who lived strictly and simply. Although we did not have a fixed place of accommodation during our travels and were constantly on the move, Beihong managed to set time aside for painting. One year, he visited the Society of Chinese Artists’ annual exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall. After viewing some of my oil paintings, he publicly declared that I was Matisse’s teacher, causing me to be at a loss for words. Later, at the invitation of Lin Yutang, he began planning a travelling exhibition of famous Chinese works to the United States and chose one of my oil paintings, Prawns, to be included. Unfortunately, it came to naught when the Japanese began bombing.

After returning to China, Beihong survived the harsh Sino-Japanese War. He became the principal of the National Beijing Art College, a position he held until his death in 1953 at the age of 59.

ENDNOTES
1 Xu Beihong held fund-raising exhibitions in Singapore and Malaya in 1939 and 1941.

YEH CHI WEI AND THE TEN MAN ART EXHIBITION

It would be an exaggeration to say that Singapore’s artistic achievements are on par with those of Paris, Rome, and Tokyo. However, it is not only fair but very modest to say that Singapore’s artistic attainments are close to world standards.

There is no definitive benchmark for this supposed world standard. Generally speaking, anyone capable of producing lasting resonance through using excellent creative techniques and unique styles to express the thoughts, emotions and lives of the people and the natural scenery of a specific region should be given that honour. Greek carvings, Italian murals, Chinese ink paintings and Indian temple architecture have all achieved splendour by exemplifying this ideal.

The majority of artists in Singapore are able to leverage on Singapore’s geographical advantages to absorb, digest and refine foreign cultures, and create a brand new kind of art. This art, which has only been promoted and supported for a short span of several decades, has advanced rapidly because of its artists’ abundant vitality and strong desire for creativity. Now, its progress can be likened to how cunning rabbits escape from their burrows into the wilderness — speeding towards a boundless horizon.

And Chi Wei is one of those leading the pack.

Chi Wei was born in China and has benefited from its 5,000-year-old culture. He is active in the south and has cultivated a diligent and honest nature. He holds his head high, looks to the West, and allows the winds of new European trends to reach him. Thus, Chi Wei makes his mark as having amalgamated Eastern and Western art.

Generally, Chi Wei paints in oil. However, he spends much time every morning practising the calligraphy of inscriptions from bronzes, stone drums, Han monuments and Wei rubbings, intensively copying and studying them. He focuses on the vigour of the brushstrokes, the care one should take in holding the brush, and the transcendental charm that results. People think that these are things to note only when practising ink painting. Little do they know that oil painting and calligraphy are closely related!