Liu Kang

Siew, Sara, Liu, Kang

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Siew, Sara and Kang Liu.

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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” (百扇斋), 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’ (中华美术研究会) 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 (林语堂), 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 (叶之威) 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!
The charm of ancient stone carvings and wall paintings has also piqued Chi Wei’s interest. He adores their imperfect beauty and inner strength, and loves even more the wondrous postures of their figures and the melody of their juxtaposition of flora and fauna. There is substance in their mistiness, and true emotion in their simplicity.

For many years, Chi Wei buried himself in books and delved into the evolution of European and American art history, as well as modern art movements; he has amassed a body of knowledge that is as wide as it is deep. He knows like the back of his hand the historical background of every era, the unique characteristics of every ethnic group, the origin and development of every art faction, and the life history and accomplishments of every artist. His artistic practice will no doubt benefit from his foundation in theory, such that he does not commit the mistakes of his predecessors; if he continues to improve and make creations of his own, there is no danger of stagnation at all.

An outstanding artist, apart from his own academic study and technical training, has to have a deep analysis and understanding of the ever-changing appearances of nature and the various facets of society. Thus, travelling becomes an essential learning experience — it broadens the mind so that one can eventually express boundless artistic concepts within the physical limits of one’s canvas. During these few years, Chi Wei has led a tour group and visited different places, happily travelling and painting at the same time, advancing his art to greater heights.

From the above observations, we have established that Chi Wei is a distinctive character. Now, let us talk about some of his works in the exhibition.

The one that leaves the deepest impression on me is *Miaw Girl Pulling a Horse* (1963). The entire painting focuses on the concept of strength. The horse wishes to gallop but the girl wants to control it, and they veer in opposite directions. Imagine: if each had their way, the entire composition would disintegrate. Fortunately, there is a rope between them, restraining both forces and stabilising the picture. There is strength in the horse charging forth, and there is strength in the girl pulling it back. The balance provided by the rope, in linking human and beast, is thus very powerful. We notice on closer observation that the horse’s legs and even the hairs of its tail contribute to this effect. To allow the main theme to stand out, a grey tone is used for the background, with near-white lines at the sides. This effect is very distinct. There are three mountain peaks in the faint distance which add to the painting’s resounding spirit and unconventional rawness. Chi Wei has used the subtle inner strength of ancient stone carvings and has infused in them the graceful rhythm of Modernism. His technique is succinct and skilful, and has reached a different and magnificent realm. Honestly speaking, such a piece of work would not be out of place in the world’s most prestigious art galleries!

*Miaw Girl* (1963) is another eye-catching painting. The subject is cradling a pipe at the side of her mouth and her eyes are opened weakly, fully expressing a state of comfortable relaxation. Her hairstyle, headdress and neck ring have all been depicted carefully. Even the small patch of gold is applied after much consideration to ensure that it is in the best location.

It is most appropriate to simulate stone carving techniques using the palette knife, and brushwork to portray the historical site of Angkor Wat (*Dawn at Angkor*). The majestic and gigantic eight-faced Buddha, with its eternal smile, commands respect without imposing fear. Those lives, which originally only existed on the canvas, are resurrected through the sturdy stones in the background, bringing warmth to our hearts. Chi Wei’s painting captures the subject so well that it is no longer necessary for one to personally visit Cambodia!

There are two pieces of *Floating Fair* (1963), one horizontal and the other vertical. I favour the vertical one. The artist uses the same principle as *Miaw Girl Pulling a Horse* to once again bring into play the efficacy of strength. With the ongoing sampan traffic, the picture is in danger of collapsing. Two boatmen have stalled mid-journey and are chatting and exchanging information. They have unintentionally halted the traffic, thereby providing stability for the composition. There are a few small boats at the top which have the task of adding to the lively atmosphere and the meandering effect in the work. This is a very
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ingenious arrangement. It is a pity that the rectangular words imitating stone inscriptions take up too much space at the bottom. It is situated too close to the centre of the painting, causing both ends to be overly symmetrical. If this space had been left blank, it would have carried more substance and would have been more meaningful.

Chi Wei has been painting for more than 30 years and has laid a deep foundation. Although there was nothing spectacular earlier on, he has improved rapidly in the last few years. His innate talent is just coming into its own, and will lead to greater things.

Although the Ten Man Art Group (十人团) is not an official organisation, its members share a common objective towards art. Thus, they are more focused and united than established organisations which have dozens of rules and regulations. Chi Wei is the leader for its creative and work affairs. I speak of him at length as an expression of my respect for him.

Yeo Hwee Bin (杨惠民) was Chi Wei’s classmate in Shanghai. He has devoted much hard work to sketching. He is especially familiar with human postures and the construction of muscles and bones. Thus, he began studying sculpting much earlier. One of his works exhibited this time, a relief of an umbrella-making factory, uses a new subject matter and is carefully composed. It completely expresses the labour of working and the joy of living. It is a work of a high order and the culmination of many years of diligence. This work has helped Malaysia erect an important milestone in the sculpting world.

Choo Keng Kwang (朱庆光) is a prolific artist. However, his high output has not affected the quality of his works. On the contrary, he gets better with each artwork. In the past two exhibitions, one could detect apprehension in his works; this year however, he is fearless, expressing himself freely. His painting has depth and expressiveness, and a rich traditional Oriental flavour. His depiction of Angkor Wat is majestic and makes you feel as if you are standing in the midst of mountain jungles, looking at these ancient ruins, reluctant to leave. Who would dare question the value of an artwork that captivates us to this extent?

Lim Tze Peng (林子平) has produced one horizontal work of the Miao district in Chiangmai which overwhelms all his other works. This alone is sufficient. Indeed, a superior work is worth paying attention to. In the past, he had blamed himself for not being able to find his way. This time, however, he can celebrate, for a wide path is before his eyes. In painting, being true to one’s nature results in excellent art.

Shui Tit Sing (许铁生) has all along emphasised the study of decorative styles. With this method, he is not restricted by the real image and can add unusual effects. It looks easy, but is actually very difficult to manoeuvre. If slightly overdone, the work will look like pure decorative art, and its artistic significance will be diminished. Tit Sing understands these consequences, so there is no danger of this happening. He even combines the techniques used in mural painting and relief carving to deal with certain complex subject matter, making us stay longer to admire his work.

Chen Cheng Mei (陈城梅) is a female artist who has a rich sense of simplicity. Prior to this, she had exhibited a good number of excellent works to good reviews. There is one of a lotus which I am unable to forget. The works exhibited this time are in keeping with her usual style, but seem even more intimate. At the risk of seeming demanding, I hope that she will make her work firmer and more compact. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Maurice Utrillo of France were famous artists who initially doodled like children. Only after they paid attention to the substance of their works did they produce works that provide much food for thought.

Tan Choo Kuan (陈子权) and Chen Cheng Mei are direct opposites. Choo Kuan is a totally objective artist. His paintings are more realistic than the object itself, and do not even let go of less important details. This is acceptable for practice but not for creative work. From past to present, the artist’s subjective spirit has always been an important component of art.

Lin Zixuan’s (林子瑄) ink paintings have leveraged on all the capabilities of ink. His style is also carefree. However, there is still room for improvement in terms of form. Kang Lih Jun (江丽君) uses subjects of the natural world in her works. The results would be better
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if she arranges her subjects a little more carefully before depicting them. Xu Bihe (徐碧和) and Chen Fuming (陈福明) are young and promising artists who are highly intelligent and bold. Their futures are certainly bright.

Through combined effort and diligent creation, the Ten Man Art Exhibition has become a modern force in Malaysia, establishing itself as a model for art movements. It will have a predictable influence on future trends.

Applied Arts and the Future of our Country

Singapore is a small island country with limited natural resources. Only a few industries, such as construction, commerce, shipping and tourism, provide for our survival.

From the workmanship and durability of a product to the attractiveness and price of a piece of merchandise, from the speed and safety of shipping services to personalised service in the tourism industry, all require a certain medium to promote themselves to attract customers. If art is the medium, it would be most relevant and effective.

A poster that is colourful and succinctly worded will attract more customers. Tasteful product packaging will increase sales!

If a hotel does not have a proper sign, it will have few guests. If an airline does not use photographs of famous sights from around the world and attractive personalities, it will inevitably be faced with empty flights. If the post office does not sell commemorative stamps, it will not be very profitable. If a cinema does not display large painted canvases advertising the movies, there will be a huge drop in box office earnings. If a restaurant does not have an eye-catching signboard, its chef will have no opportunity to use his skills. If a tobacco company does not have dazzling advertisements, only its boss will know the flavour of its cigarettes. Advertising has the paradoxical effect of giving people a chance to see that it is the product that truly matters!

A book needs a cover. A bar of soap needs a wrapper. A vinyl record needs a sleeve. A can of pineapples needs a brand logo. As for the wide range of cosmetics, designers have to rack their brains to please the ladies. This practice undoubtedly exists to pander to our natural inclination for pretty things, yet also adds to joy in life. In fact, however, these are but concerted attempts to persuade customers to part with their money. Applied arts are the use of quick thinking and adept skills to transfer artistic ideas onto an object in the pursuit of economic gain.

Therefore, while the objective of pure art remains of prime importance, the work of a craftsman is to simply follow instructions and complete the job.