Liu Kang
Siew, Sara, Liu, Kang

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Siew, Sara and Kang Liu.

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Take an advertisement for example. The designer prepares a template, determining the composition and colours before handing it over to the printer. The technician reproduces accordingly, and the job is done.

Another example is the flowery felt rug. Workers weave and dye the material according to the artisan’s draft design, colour tones and composition, after which an item of merchandise is ready for sale.

And then there are artists who are innately talented, and who also produce such works with their own hands. This is very rare. Pablo Picasso is one such rare and great master. He uses clay to mould a fruit platter, a flower vase or a jug. Once fired, it is a finished product with not only a functional purpose but also pure artistic value. This has made for an important revolution in the ceramic industry.

Art advertisements in Singapore have always been vibrant. It is a huge boost to the country’s prosperity. People in this field are usually excellent artists. They form their own societies and frequently organise activities, including art research. This time, we have enlisted members and non-members to take part in this public exhibition of art design. An exhibition of this magnitude, in size and content, is unprecedented. I believe that this beginning will lead to regular exhibitions and encourage Singaporeans’ interest in applied arts. Living in the competitive 20th century, we need to maintain a high level of intelligence and excellence in art. Otherwise, we would not excel even if we were a big country with abundant resources.

Chi Wei in the Last Ten Years

Music has been referred to as the common language of all the nations of the world. Yet, each nation’s music has its unique style and rhythm, such as the smooth and optimistic Italian opera, the solemn and majestic German orchestra, and the heavy and gloomy Russian folk song. All these differences are due to the natural environment and characteristics of the respective nationalities.

The same goes for art, even though some art critics have declared that since 1945, art schools and factions around the world have converged and are no longer different. However, in painting and abstract art the objectives of European and American art still vary greatly. Japanese and Australian artistic interests are equally disparate.

Singapore, with its advantageous geographical position and multi-racial make-up, is evidently the most suitable breeding ground for international art. However, the strong influence of traditional culture on the different races is difficult to shake off.

Chi Wei (叶之威) created his art under these circumstances. On one hand, he is influenced by the progressive spirit of the West; on the other, he maintains the solemn and unrestrained appeal of Oriental art. Here, the former refers to Chi Wei’s courage to experiment and continuously undergo transformation in order to attain perfection. The latter refers to his simple style, lofty and clean images, and the witty compositions which reveal him to be almost at the peak of artistic success.

Ten years ago, Chi Wei’s art did not catch anyone’s attention because he was working along a typical route. Although he was already excellent in technique, he was still unable to show his individuality. Fortunately, after some deep contemplation, he comprehended the true meaning of “technique is not art,” freed himself from the burden of the banal, and threw himself into a surging and glowing world of creativity. On one hand, he observes Oriental and Eastern art trends and intensively studies how he can harmonise the two; on the other, he uses the southern islands’ natural scenery and life for subject matter, merging sentiment and wisdom with form and spirit, producing outstanding works. These works have been exhibited twice in the Ten Man Art Exhibition that toured Indonesia and the east coast of Malaysia, and that shocked art circles and generated
much attention. The Ten Man Art Exhibition is intrinsically a group activity, but Chi Wei is the mastermind and soul of its artistic thought. We may therefore consider it a measure of Chi Wei’s personal creative process.

The third Ten Man Art Exhibition was held in 1964 after Chi Wei toured Thailand and Cambodia. This exhibition yielded abundant results, leaving a deep impression on many. Till today, I still see in my mind Miaw Girl Pulling a Horse (1963), which he painted in Chiangmai. Let me describe it briefly. On the canvas, a horse is galloping towards the west, but its rider is pulling it to the east. The extreme opposing movements by rider and horse have caused both to veer away from the centre of the artwork, which is in danger of losing its balance. Fortunately, a rope links the subjects — the horse looks back, slightly; the girl keeps her balance, just barely — and the picture is stable. Although the rope is as fine as a strand of silk, it has enormous strength. This may be credited to the application of physics and the ingenious management of the composition. In terms of colour, black is used for the human figure and the horse, while a complementary shade of grey is used in the background. The painting is powerful yet gentle, and fully evokes the clear and cool climate of the highlands. The brushstrokes and palette knife technique carve out forms that channel the elegance and simplicity of ancient stone tablets, causing viewers to temporarily forget worldly thoughts and gain boundless spiritual consolation.

If I were asked to name the most outstanding local work in the last ten years, I would choose Miaw Girl Pulling a Horse without any hesitation.

This does not mean that Chi Wei has produced only one excellent work. In fact, there are many equally fine works, such as Miaw Girl (1963) and Floating Market (1963).

However, Chi Wei’s art can be classified into two categories: one that is carefully shaped and diligently arranged for deliberate completion, and one that follows inspiration, is unrestrained and bold, and which has a lofty aura. I prefer the latter because inspiration cannot be forced, or it will appear contrived. The latter also has excellent rhythm that is forthright and carefree, and an indescribable joy.

Prior to Classicism, the regular use by artists of black and brown as main colours had a dim and suffocating effect. In the hands of the Impressionists, black and brown were completely abandoned and replaced with green, purple, blue and orange. These colours are very vibrant, but not profound and firm enough. Thus, modern schools of art started to use black and brown again. However, it now played an entirely different role, ascending from being a complementary presence to a stabilising one. At the same time, black and brown now have the duty of providing contrast to make other colours more outstanding. For example, the combination of black and white creates an unrestrained and profound effect that is reminiscent of Chinese ink painting.

Chi Wei is an expert in mixing black. There is not a work by him that does not use black. It is as if he is almost loath to begin in the absence of black. Black is by nature gloomy and quiet. However, when compared with other colours, its dignity and refinement come to the fore. Never the easiest to control, black is nevertheless a basic unit of colour that we cannot do without. Whoever masters it proves that his skills have reached a respectable level. Furthermore, Chi Wei has enlisted grey, a brother colour, for greater effect. In the family of grey, there is greyish blue, greyish green, greyish yellow, and greyish brown, among others. Every type of grey has its unique flavour, like chewing olives, smoking cigars, or eating stewed soft-shelled turtle... in short, each of them is suffused with an intrinsic flavour.

Indonesia’s Borobodur and Cambodia’s Angkor Wat are both famous tourist attractions, but their greater significance lies in the fact that they symbolise Oriental culture. They demonstrate high artistic attainments, are unique in style, and have a long history. Besides admiring them, Chi Wei was inspired by them. To give his works an ancient flavour and to display the Oriental spirit, Chi Wei uses the many expressive methods of relief stone carving to display the purity and profundity of their simplicity, and the grandeur in their weightiness.

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One of the important techniques in modern art is the transformation of an object's form and the liberation of colours. In the transformation of forms, redundancies are removed, focal points exaggerated, and the actual contours of objects amended to accommodate
the rhythms of the composition. Liberation of colours refers to abandoning the practice of imitating natural colours, instead mixing freely the artist's favourite colours so that the painting may reveal his unique rhythm and personality. As Chi Wei understands these principles deeply, he is able to work freely with no obstacles. His works display the dreamlike state of Abstractionism and the steel-like postures of Cubism. Chi Wei has one leg in this world and another in the heavens, while not losing a hold on reality. Indeed, one must wonder: if this is not the acme of perfection, what is?

It turns out that Chi Wei has already put a lot of hard work into studying the theories of modern art schools and various artists, such as the pros and cons of various styles. His plans are well considered, so that when he picks up his colour palette, he is able to work proficiently. He has also diligently absorbed the many profound mysteries of Chinese calligraphy, such as its strokes, strengths and gestures. Undoubtedly, this has helped in elevating the standard of his painting.

In the past few years, Chi Wei has put all sundry duties on hold in order to travel and paint more. He puts his heart and soul into his art, and is very productive. A genius of Southeast Asia has blossomed.

**Eastern and Western Cultures, and Art in Singapore**

The force of art knows no national boundaries. Art is the product of a person's exploration of the unknown world of the soul. Its highest achievement is to represent the common sentiment of all humanity. For example, the *Eroica* by Ludwig van Beethoven and classical Indian dance have reached the highest standards and are appreciated by people from all over the world. Similarly, Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Qi Baishi's *Prawns* — the former rich and passionate while the latter elegant, natural and unrestrained — are not merely unique in style; their techniques and artistic concepts have also reached a peak of perfection that both Easterners and Westerners admire.

The above examples show that while the power of art transcends national boundaries, artistic concepts and formal aspects may still vary greatly. On one hand, they are influenced by one's cultural milieu; on the other, they depend on artists' individual understanding of the themes and their special expressive capabilities.

Singapore is a newly independent country. Although it is only three years old, it has a history of 150 years from the time of its founding. Taking it a step further, in terms of its resident ethnic groups, Singapore's cultural makeup is not only rich and complex but is also a few thousand years old. Singapore also occupies a special geographical location. In Southeast Asia, it is a trading centre and also a strategic military base. As a point where East and West meet, it serves as an air and sea transportation hub. In terms of human flows, it is at the crossroads of the world. In terms of culture, it is a huge melting pot.

Our cultural tradition is not only enriched by the different races, it also straddles both East and West. Under these circumstances, local artists should be able to produce works in new styles. I study painting, so I shall begin by talking about the characteristics of Eastern and Western fine arts.

**Comparing traditions of Western and Eastern fine arts**

Generally, we may use “the spiritual” and “the corporeal” as the starting point for both cultures. Eastern culture is “soulful,” “spiritual” and “philosophical”; Western culture is “corporeal,” “material” and “realistic.” Eastern philosophy contains unique interpretations