Liu Kang

Siew, Sara, Liu, Kang

Published by National Gallery Singapore

Siew, Sara and Kang Liu.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/110043

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3343937
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 (齐白石) 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.
of Laozi (老子), Zhuangzi (庄子) and Shakyamuni. Its attitude towards nature is one of acceptance and co-existence. Since the Hellenic period, the West has emphasised the study of mathematics and science. Hence, its position of curiosity towards and conquest of nature led to the flourishing of science and machinery, and produced the concepts of perspective and anatomy. Of course, this is not to say that there is absolutely no science in the East or absolutely no philosophy in the West. It is only to say that the focus of these two cultural streams has been different in the course of a large part of history. These traditional differences are naturally reflected in their aesthetics. I would like to talk about subject matter and technique separately.

Subject matter

Eastern artists treat natural scenery as the starting point for depicting their emotions. Hence, Chinese painting since the Tang and Song dynasties has always used nature as the main subject matter; human figures are secondary. Western paintings, inheriting the Greek preference for physical might, uphold the beauty of the body as their highest principle. Hence, they have always used human figures as the main subject matter and nature as scenery. The majority of their paintings of human figures are nude paintings.

In subject matter, Eastern art and Western art are exact opposites. The most authoritative Chinese paintings after the Tang and Song dynasties were landscape paintings. Depicted in the landscape paintings are largely lofty and imposing natural scenes, typically with five to six mountain peaks appearing among drifting clouds or two or three sages reading books, plucking the zither, playing chess, or admiring a waterfall. The scenery and people contain deep symbolic meaning and reflect the artist's ideas and emotions.

Every painting in Western art since the Hellenic period, through the Renaissance to the birth of Impressionism, has used the human figure as its theme. Presented on the ancient vases of Greece are many group scenes of sports and competitions. The three great works of the Renaissance — Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (1506), Michelangelo’s The Creation of Adam (1511) and Sanzio Raphael’s School of Athens (1511) — are the epitome of figure painting.

Because of improvements in the study of colour and optics, seventeenth-century Dutch artists like Rembrandt van Rijn and Peter Paul Rubens were able to completely and realistically express the human body’s texture, valour and vitality. By the late 19th century, Impressionist masters had gone one step further by fusing the human body, sunlight, water and air into one entity. Interior scenes or outdoor elements of lakes, mountains, trees and stones are placed in the empty spaces behind the human figures to accentuate them. Chinese paintings prior to the Han Dynasty also used human figures as their main theme. However, [in comparison] landscape painting had already been established as an independent genre some 1,300 years ago, by the time of the Tang Dynasty. Representations of landscape in Western painting actually evolved from being a mere complement to human figures into a genre of its own about 300 years ago through the efforts of Dutch painter Jacob Isaakszoon van Ruisdael, French painters Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and Jean-François Millet, and the English painters John Constable and John Mallord William Turner. Most Chinese landscape artists belonged to the literati during feudal China and led carefree lives. Hence, the artistic concepts underlying their paintings are exceptional and not easily understood by common folk. They are at times dreamy, at times poetic. All Chinese understand the famous saying, ‘A painting within a poem and a poem within a painting’ (诗中有画，画中有诗). Western paintings, with human figures as their main focus, pay more attention to the form of the image and its function as a form of documentation. Apart from simple portraiture and the documentary of historical events, they are invariably religious in nature. Hence, the colour, light, composition and postures of the human figures are more important than in Chinese paintings.

Technique

The manner of expression in Eastern painting is abstract, minimal and clean, while that in Western painting is inclined towards the realistic and concrete.

Chinese painting relies only on the use of simple and forceful lines, contrasting concentrated and diluted ink tones to fully capture the focal point of the object. The artist, in an ambiguous state of contemplation and with an equivocality of composition, paints as he desires — and paintings imbued with effervescence are produced. I am afraid that I am a little too general in the way I have put it; do excuse me. Now I shall discuss the
of Laozi (老子), Zhuangzi (庄子) and Shakyamuni. Its attitude towards nature is one of acceptance and co-existence. Since the Hellenic period, the West has emphasised the study of mathematics and science. Hence, its position of curiosity towards and conquest of nature led to the flourishing of science and machinery, and produced the concepts of perspective and anatomy. Of course, this is not to say that there is absolutely no science in the East or absolutely no philosophy in the West. It is only to say that the focus of these two cultural streams has been different in the course of a large part of history. These traditional differences are naturally reflected in their aesthetics. I would like to talk about subject matter and technique separately.

Subject matter

Eastern artists treat natural scenery as the starting point for depicting their emotions. Hence, Chinese painting since the Tang and Song dynasties has always used nature as the main subject matter; human figures are secondary. Western paintings, inheriting the Greek preference for physical might, uphold the beauty of the body as their highest principle. Hence, they have always used human figures as the main subject matter and nature as scenery. The majority of their paintings of human figures are nude paintings.

In subject matter, Eastern art and Western art are exact opposites. The most authoritative Chinese paintings after the Tang and Song dynasties were landscape paintings. Depicted in the landscape paintings are largely lofty and imposing natural scenes, typically with five to six mountain peaks appearing among drifting clouds or two or three sages reading books, plucking the zither, playing chess, or admiring a waterfall. The scenery and people contain deep symbolic meaning and reflect the artist’s ideas and emotions.

Every painting in Western art since the Hellenic period, through the Renaissance to the birth of Impressionism, has used the human figure as its theme. Presented on the ancient vases of Greece are many group scenes of sports and competitions. The three great works of the Renaissance — Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa (1506), Michelangelo’s The Creation of Adam (1511) and Sanzio Raphael’s School of Athens (1511) — are the epitome of figure painting. Because of improvements in the study of colour and optics, seventeenth-century Dutch artists like Rembrandt van Rijn and Peter Paul Rubens were able to completely and realistically express the human body’s texture, valour and vitality. By the late 19th century, Impressionist masters had gone one step further by fusing the human body, sunlight, water and air into one entity. Interior scenes or outdoor elements of lakes, mountains, trees and stones are placed in the empty spaces behind the human figures to accentuate them. Chinese paintings prior to the Han Dynasty also used human figures as their main theme. However, in comparison landscape painting had already been established as an independent genre some 1,300 years ago, by the time of the Tang Dynasty. Representations of landscape in Western painting actually evolved from being a mere complement to human figures into a genre of its own about 300 years ago through the efforts of Dutch painter Jacob Isaakszoon van Ruisdael, French painters Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and Jean-François Millet, and the English painters John Constable and John Mallord William Turner. Most Chinese landscape artists belonged to the literati during feudal China and led carefree lives. Hence, the artistic concepts underlying their paintings are exceptional and not easily understood by common folk. They are at times dreamy, at times poetic. All Chinese understand the famous saying, “A painting within a poem and a poem within a painting” (诗中有画,画中有诗). Western paintings, with human figures as their main focus, pay more attention to the form of the image and its function as a form of documentation. Apart from simple portraiture and the documentary of historical events, they are invariably religious in nature. Hence, the colour, light, composition and postures of the human figures are more important than in Chinese paintings.

Technique

The manner of expression in Eastern painting is abstract, minimal and clean, while that in Western painting is inclined towards the realistic and concrete.

Chinese painting relies only on the use of simple and forceful lines, contrasting concentrated and diluted ink tones to fully capture the focal point of the object. The artist, in an ambiguous state of contemplation and with an equivocality of composition, paints as he desires — and paintings imbued with effervescence are produced. I am afraid that I am a little too general in the way I have put it; do excuse me. Now I shall discuss the
more important matter concerning the use of the brush and ink. Brush-handling tech-
niques in Chinese painting and calligraphy share the same basis. First, one would need to know how to hold a brush and use the strength of the wrist and the arm. Only then would one be able to paint well. Jing Hao (荆浩) of the Five Dynasties (五代) stated specifically in his notes on brush techniques (笔法记): “All brushes have four stances: connectedness, fullness, uprightness and vigour.” The modern artist Huang Binhong (黄宾虹) is even more thorough. He concluded that there are five methods and three faults. The five methods are stability, reserve, roundedness, heaviness and transformation; the three faults are stiffness, harshness and entanglement.

The most unique feature of Chinese painting is its ink method. Normally, when we say that ink consists of five colours, we mean that with different densities and nuances we can paint any object in the universe and every change in nature without depending on the play of red, yellow, green and other colours. Moreover, the sole use of ink in painting can also enhance elegance and simplicity. Huang Binhong had the best ink technique which can be classified into the seven methods: accumulated ink (积墨), burnt ink (焦墨), heavy ink (浓墨), faint ink (淡墨), intermittent ink (破墨), aged ink (宿墨), and splashed ink (泼墨). Accumulated ink can increase the perspective of depth in a painting; burnt ink has the effect of adding life in a painting; heavy ink is used to present the darker shade of an object; faint ink is used to present the lighter shade of an object or remote scenic images; intermittent ink is used to eliminate the divide between heavy and faint ink; aged ink is used to increase the distinctiveness of a painting; splashed ink can be used to emphasise the grandeur of a painting and its vigour. In summary, the ability of Chinese painting to stand on its own and form its own unique style is due to its brush and ink techniques, which are its fundamentals.

Western painting techniques are more scientific. Da Vinci wrote the Ten Principles of Painting, which mainly concerns contour, chiaroscuro, colour, perspective, anatomy, composition, brush technique and many other issues. It is similar to the Six Principles (六法论) proposed by China’s Xie He (谢赫). The six principles are liveliness, strength in brushwork, appropriate portrayal of object, addition of colour required in portraying the subject, meticulousness of structure, and copying. If we were to compare further, it is not difficult to see that Western painting has additional principles such as chiaroscuro, perspective and anatomy, with a greater scientific basis for accuracy in portraying objects. The images presented in the painting have a realistic, three-dimensional quality. The painting distinguishes between far and near, especially inscribing in minute detail the human skeletal frame, muscles, proportion and bodily movements. Eastern and Western paintings, when created by the various masters, each have their own merits. However, typically, Chinese painting tends to be abstruse while Western painting tends to be grounded.

Convergence of Eastern and Western modern art
The modern fine arts of the East and West already show signs of convergence. This should be attributed to several Post-Impressionist masters. The first, Paul Cézanne, who is known as the father of modern art, felt that Impressionism and Pointillism were overly scientific and analytical and that art had become a slave to science. Hence, he opposed the objective portrayals that Western artists subscribed to and embraced the subjective expression that Eastern artists exhibited, paving the way for the emergence of various schools of art. It is for this that he is known as a pre-eminent master. The second, Paul Gauguin, was influenced by the “return to nature” of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and left the city to reside in anonymity in Tahiti. He painted colourful flat images using colours that were vibrant but not gilded, and with raw lines for contours. In all respects, he aimed to return to a state of unaffectedness, and to depict the original innocence of man.

The third, Vincent van Gogh, upon seeing the unique effect of lines in the brush tech-
nique of Oriental paintings, decided to create a similar effect on canvas — and it was as if an Oriental had executed his oil paintings. He abandoned the numerous bother-
some details of chiaroscuro and perspective, and focused on the effects of brushstrokes and composition that would most move the viewer. Inspired by these masters, new art schools were successively established, with Cubism, Fauvism and Futurism being the more important ones. Among them, a group of Fauvists in particular was more adept at using the special techniques of Oriental artists and in understanding the essence of Oriental artistic concepts. Henri Matisse was the main leader of Fauvism. He was even
more important matter concerning the use of the brush and ink. Brush-handling techniques in Chinese painting and calligraphy share the same basis. First, one would need to know how to hold a brush and use the strength of the wrist and the arm. Only then would one be able to paint well. Jing Hao of the Five Dynasties stated specifically in his notes on brush techniques: “All brushes have four stances: connectedness, fullness, uprightness and vigour.” The modern artist Huang Binhong is even more thorough. He concluded that there are five methods and three faults. The five methods are stability, reserve, roundedness, heaviness and transformation; the three faults are stiffness, harshness and entanglement.

The most unique feature of Chinese painting is its ink method. Normally, when we say that ink consists of five colours, we mean that with different densities and nuances we can paint any object in the universe and every change in nature without depending on the play of red, yellow, green and other colours. Moreover, the sole use of ink in painting can also enhance elegance and simplicity. Huang Binhong had the best ink technique which can be classified into the seven methods: accumulated ink, burnt ink (焦墨), heavy ink (浓墨), faint ink (淡墨), intermittent ink (破墨), aged ink (宿墨), and splashed ink (泼墨). Accumulated ink can increase the perspective of depth in a painting; burnt ink has the effect of adding life in a painting; heavy ink is used to present the darker shade of an object; faint ink is used to present the lighter shade of an object or remote scenic images; intermittent ink is used to eliminate the divide between heavy and faint ink; aged ink is used to increase the distinctiveness of a painting; splashed ink can be used to emphasise the grandeur of a painting and its vigour. In summary, the ability of Chinese painting to stand on its own and form its own unique style is due to its brush and ink techniques, which are its fundamentals.

Western painting techniques are more scientific. Da Vinci wrote the Ten Principles of Painting, which mainly concerns contour, chiaroscuro, colour, perspective, anatomy, composition, brush technique and many other issues. It is similar to the Six Principles proposed by China’s Xie He. The six principles are liveliness, strength in brushwork, appropriate portrayal of object, addition of colour required in portraying the subject, meticulousness of structure, and copying. If we were to compare further, it is not difficult to see that Western painting has additional principles such as chiaroscuro, perspective and anatomy, with a greater scientific basis for accuracy in portraying objects. The images presented in the painting have a realistic, three-dimensional quality. The painting distinguishes between far and near, especially inscribing in minute detail the human skeletal frame, muscles, proportion and bodily movements. Eastern and Western paintings, when created by the various masters, each have their own merits. However, typically, Chinese painting tends to be abstruse while Western painting tends to be grounded.

Convergence of Eastern and Western modern art

The modern fine arts of the East and West already show signs of convergence. This should be attributed to several Post-Impressionist masters. The first, Paul Cézanne, who is known as the father of modern art, felt that Impressionism and Pointillism were overly scientific and analytical and that art had become a slave to science. Hence, he opposed the objective portrayals that Western artists subscribed to and embraced the subjective expression that Eastern artists exhibited, paving the way for the emergence of various schools of art. It is for this that he is known as a pre-eminent master. The second, Paul Gauguin, was influenced by the “return to nature” of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and left the city to reside in anonymity in Tahiti. He painted colourful flat images using colours that were vibrant but not gilded, and with raw lines for contours. In all respects, he aimed to return to a state of unaffectedness, and to depict the original innocence of man.

The third, Vincent van Gogh, upon seeing the unique effect of lines in the brush technique of Oriental paintings, decided to create a similar effect on canvas — and it was as if an Oriental had executed his oil paintings. He abandoned the numerous bothersome details of chiaroscuro and perspective, and focused on the effects of brushstrokes and composition that would most move the viewer. Inspired by these masters, new art schools were successively established, with Cubism, Fauvism and Futurism being the more important ones. Among them, a group of Fauvists in particular was more adept at using the special techniques of Oriental artists and in understanding the essence of Oriental artistic concepts. Henri Matisse was the main leader of Fauvism. He was even
referred to as a musician of colour and poet of line, as evidenced by his colour combinations and line technique. In addition, he followed Oriental styles as much as possible in the use of positive and negative spaces in composition, the omission of chiaroscuro, and the incorporation of a decorative style and simplified technique, such that the painting takes on an ingenuous character.

Currently, the popular abstract art that was pioneered by Wassily Kandinsky 50 years ago maintains its relation to Oriental art. We know that Chinese calligraphy is the oldest form of abstract art in the world. It does not have any tangible imagery, colour, or chiaroscuro. It only has the assemblage of vertical and horizontal brush lines, the parallelism of a skeletal structure coupled with the modulation of the strength of the brush, and the boldness and elegance of its brush stances. Viewers would be able to comprehend different kinds of charm, some bold and magnificent; others, natural and unrestrained. The Chinese often hang a central scroll or a couplet in their halls. The meaning of the script is secondary. The admiration of the artistry of the calligraphy is the primary objective. Abstract painting uses this as its basis. Although there is colour, it does not represent certain objects in the natural world. It depends simply on the combination of warm and cold tones, the swiftness of the lines, and the control of heavy and light brush techniques to produce a charming artwork. As modern painting has refused to become a narrative tool for events and objects, it only expresses the artists’ emotions and imagination. Hence, true modern art simply need not prescribe a theme for a viewer to be able to use his own appreciative ability and experience different responses to the work. We often see such titles in art catalogues or content programmes: Composition VIII; Work No. 30; Blue Symphony; Composition in Grey and Yellow, among others. Those are only marks of identification attached to certain pieces of work, their words actually devoid of meaning. Is this not similar to the theory of the appreciation of calligraphy? As seen, the position of Eastern art seems to be more suitable and better able to nurture artists’ uninhibited display of their subjective perceptions. Of course, Oriental art can also derive many valuable lessons from Western art. In the last few hundred years, Chinese artists have made few realistic sketches and observations, and have developed the bad habit of copying their predecessors’ works. Hence, there is usually no new creation, and not many great artists have emerged during this period.

The status of art in Singapore

Most of the residents of Singapore are immigrants, the majority of whom are Chinese. Singapore’s artistic creations can be divided into three categories: Chinese painting, Western painting and batik painting. In Chinese painting, subject matter is still mostly traditional Chinese landscapes and flowers. Fortunately, a number of artists are able to use the technique of Western life-painting, observation in situ, and the charm of ink and brush in Chinese painting to capture the characteristics of Nanyang. It is a pity that currently there is a group of young artists who prefer the simplicity of Chinese ink painting and who compose plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo and chrysanthemums in a few hasty strokes. Thus, they make fools of themselves by imitating others and painting in an ill-disciplined manner. They go to the extent of exhibiting many so-called Chinese paintings with no creative significance and no technical merit. Little do they know that Chinese calligraphy and painting share a common origin. To learn painting, one must first learn calligraphy. If one is not proficient in calligraphy, one’s painting would be superficial. Furthermore, the local customs, environment, landscapes and plants are different from the traditional subject matter of Chinese painting. If we continue to imitate, we will only be delimiting our own creativity. Indeed, Western painting seeks both local peoples and scenery as its subject matter. There are some artists who are able to capture the ambience of the tropics with their broad strokes and rich colours, even if most of them follow the style of early Cubism.

Recently, more artists are producing abstract works. They have also started to experiment with different materials on canvas or board to increase the number of variations in the composition and texture of the painted surface. However, there are also many youths who, envious of the novelty and thrill of modern art in Europe and the United States, take shortcuts by emulating them. Although there are some resemblances on the surface, they are hollow and without substance, and will not be able to stand the test of time. These youths deceive both others and themselves. The main reason [for their insubstantial work] is that they have not strove hard to build a strong foundation. They have not studied the theories to thoroughly understand artistic philosophy, thus creating works that baffle even themselves.
referred to as a musician of colour and poet of line, as evidenced by his colour combinations and line technique. In addition, he followed Oriental styles as much as possible in the use of positive and negative spaces in composition, the omission of chiaroscuro, and the incorporation of a decorative style and simplified technique, such that the painting takes on an ingenuous character.

Currently, the popular abstract art that was pioneered by Wassily Kandinsky 50 years ago maintains its relation to Oriental art. We know that Chinese calligraphy is the oldest form of abstract art in the world. It does not have any tangible imagery, colour, or chiaroscuro. It only has the assemblage of vertical and horizontal brush lines, the parallelism of a skeletal structure coupled with the modulation of the strength of the brush, and the boldness and elegance of its brush stances. Viewers would be able to comprehend different kinds of charm, some bold and magnificent; others, natural and unrestrained.

The Chinese often hang a central scroll or a couplet in their halls. The meaning of the script is secondary. The admiration of the artistry of the calligraphy is the primary objective. Abstract painting uses this as its basis. Although there is colour, it does not represent certain objects in the natural world. It depends simply on the combination of warm and cold tones, the swiftness of the lines, and the control of heavy and light brush techniques to produce a charming artwork. As modern painting has refused to become a narrative tool for events and objects, it only expresses the artists' emotions and imagination. Hence, true modern art simply need not prescribe a theme for a viewer to be able to use his own appreciative ability and experience different responses to the work. We often see such titles in art catalogues or content programmes: Composition VIII; Work No. 30; Blue Symphony; Composition in Grey and Yellow, among others. Those are only marks of identification attached to certain pieces of work, their words actually devoid of meaning. Is this not similar to the theory of the appreciation of calligraphy? As seen, the position of Eastern art seems to be more suitable and better able to nurture artists' uninhibited display of their subjective perceptions. Of course, Oriental art can also derive many valuable lessons from Western art. In the last few hundred years, Chinese artists have made few realistic sketches and observations, and have developed the bad habit of copying their predecessors' works. Hence, there is usually no new creation, and not many great artists have emerged during this period.

The status of art in Singapore

Most of the residents of Singapore are immigrants, the majority of whom are Chinese. Singapore's artistic creations can be divided into three categories: Chinese painting, Western painting and batik painting. In Chinese painting, subject matter is still mostly traditional Chinese landscapes and flowers. Fortunately, a number of artists are able to use the technique of Western life-painting, observation in situ, and the charm of ink and brush in Chinese painting to capture the characteristics of Nanyang. It is a pity that currently there is a group of young artists who prefer the simplicity of Chinese ink painting and who compose plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo and chrysanthemums in a few hasty strokes. Thus, they make fools of themselves by imitating others and painting in an ill-disciplined manner. They go to the extent of exhibiting many so-called Chinese paintings with no creative significance and no technical merit. Little do they know that Chinese calligraphy and painting share a common origin. To learn painting, one must first learn calligraphy. If one is not proficient in calligraphy, one's painting would be superficial. Furthermore, the local customs, environment, landscapes and plants are different from the traditional subject matter of Chinese painting. If we continue to imitate, we will only be delimiting our own creativity. Indeed, Western painting seeks both local peoples and scenery as its subject matter. There are some artists who are able to capture the ambience of the tropics with their broad strokes and rich colours, even if most of them follow the style of early Cubism.

Recently, more artists are producing abstract works. They have also started to experiment with different materials on canvas or board to increase the number of variations in the composition and texture of the painted surface. However, there are also many youths who, envious of the novelty and thrill of modern art in Europe and the United States, take shortcuts by emulating them. Although there are some resemblances on the surface, they are hollow and without substance, and will not be able to stand the test of time. These youths deceive both others and themselves. The main reason [for their insubstantial work] is that they have not strove hard to build a strong foundation. They have not studied the theories to thoroughly understand artistic philosophy, thus creating works that baffle even themselves.
Batik painting uses the method of dyeing and printing sarong patterns for its artistic presentation, and is characterised by its extremely rich tropical style. I would term it the "equatorial style." We live at the equator where there is strong sunlight, lush vegetation, and varied and exciting ways of living. Such materials are suited for portrayal in forceful colours and with robust lines. In addition, the work of some artists is suffused with the stylised shapes of modern art, enabling their styles to be completely transformed. The batik artists' elevation of a craft into fine art, thus giving it a new lease of life, is a contribution that we should be proud of.

Conditions for raising artistic standards
The greatest inconvenience for local artists is the lack of opportunities to directly see and study masterpieces. In other words, there is no sizeable art museum. An artist, regardless of how gifted he is, needs to seek experience from past traditions and gain nourishment from his predecessors' works. Exploring blindly in the dark or basing his study on some inferior printed copy would make it extremely difficult for him to improve. Every major city in Europe, the United States, Japan and China has established art museums displaying masterpieces by artists throughout history. On one hand, it allows people to visit and increases their ability to appreciate art, and is a strategy for popularising art; on the other hand, it allows artists opportunity for in-depth study and inspires their creative impulses and desires, thus killing two birds with one stone. While many local collectors, including Tan Tsze Chor (陈之初) — who has more than a thousand masterpieces from various dynasties — have rich collections, they are unable to display their entire collections for lack of space. As the collections are managed in a personal leisurely capacity, they are unable to conform to public needs and are thus not ideal for our purposes. If the government is able to build an official gallery that is spacious, with suitable lighting and secure management, artworks could be donated for display. With gradual accumulation and acquisition over time, the scale of such a collection would naturally reach international standards. There is no lack of examples in other countries. This issue is entirely up to us.

Apart from a fine arts museum and an art academy, the development of local fine arts is intricately related to the state of its sister arts. In truth, the painting scene in Singapore has blossomed beautifully after many years of laborious cultivation by many highly talented artists. In terms of quality, there is no shame in proclaiming that we are nearing international standards. In the field of sculpture, there are not that many practitioners and we cannot yet tell — especially since there are no monumental creations to speak of. At present, this need appears more pressing. For example, at many traffic roundabouts and public squares, we only see fountains and flowers. They are beautiful but lack cultural ambience, making it difficult for us to achieve the noble objectives of cultivating the people's self-refinement or showcasing our local talent to tourists. Architecture has also been valued more for its function than its contribution to fine arts, so there are not many buildings in Singapore with artistic qualities. There are a few residential buildings that combine Eastern and Western elements but which, because of an inability to manipulate the aesthetics of interior and exterior ingeniously, remain mediocre.

Within the arts, music is the most abstract and profound. At the same time, it is also the most sensitive means of expressing the sentiments of a country's people. Singapore's
Batik painting uses the method of dyeing and printing sarong patterns for its artistic presentation, and is characterised by its extremely rich tropical style. I would term it the “equatorial style.” We live at the equator where there is strong sunlight, lush vegetation, and varied and exciting ways of living. Such materials are suited for portrayal in forceful colours and with robust lines. In addition, the work of some artists is suffused with the stylised shapes of modern art, enabling their styles to be completely transformed. The batik artists’ elevation of a craft into fine art, thus giving it a new lease of life, is a contribution that we should be proud of.

Conditions for raising artistic standards

The greatest inconvenience for local artists is the lack of opportunities to directly see and study masterpieces. In other words, there is no sizeable art museum. An artist, regardless of how gifted he is, needs to seek experience from past traditions and gain nourishment from his predecessors’ works. Exploring blindly in the dark or basing his study on some inferior printed copy would make it extremely difficult for him to improve. Every major city in Europe, the United States, Japan and China has established art museums displaying masterpieces by artists throughout history. On one hand, it allows people to visit and increases their ability to appreciate art, and is a strategy for popularising art; on the other hand, it allows artists opportunity for in-depth study and inspires their creative impulses and desires, thus killing two birds with one stone. While many local collectors, including Tan Tsze Chor (陈之初) — who has more than a thousand masterpieces from various dynasties — have rich collections, they are unable to display their entire collections for lack of space. As the collections are managed in a personal leisurely capacity, they are unable to conform to public needs and are thus not ideal for our purposes. If the government is able to build an official gallery that is spacious, with suitable lighting and secure management, artworks could be donated for display. With gradual accumulation and acquisition over time, the scale of such a collection would naturally reach international standards. There is no lack of examples in other countries. This issue is entirely up to us.

A fine arts museum allows people to admire or study art, and attracts tourists. As for nurturing a group of artistic talents, that is dependent on the establishment of an art academy. Although at present there is the independent Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (南洋美术专科学校), its teaching quality and facilities are not yet ideal because of limited resources. It only has a faculty of painting, which is overly narrow in scope and counter to our aims of promoting other forms of art. If the government could take the initiative in establishing an art academy, the results will certainly be far more exciting. Last year, the Arts Council took the initiative to raise funds for the setting up of a fine arts museum. There was overwhelming response from sponsors and more than a million dollars was raised. However, the establishment of a national defence foundation diverted the public’s attention and the fundraising drive fell short of its proposed target of three million dollars. From a long-term perspective, the promotion of culture and creation of art is not any less important than national defence. Since we have naturally endowed advantages and the conditions mentioned earlier, we need more effort to realise this vision. The establishment of a fine arts museum and an art academy should now be given priority.

Apart from a fine arts museum and an art academy, the development of local fine arts is intricately related to the state of its sister arts. In truth, the painting scene in Singapore has blossomed beautifully after many years of laborious cultivation by many highly talented artists. In terms of quality, there is no shame in proclaiming that we are nearing international standards. In the field of sculpture, there are not that many practitioners and we cannot yet tell — especially since there are no monumental creations to speak of. At present, this need appears more pressing. For example, at many traffic roundabouts and public squares, we only see fountains and flowers. They are beautiful but lack cultural ambience, making it difficult for us to achieve the noble objectives of cultivating the people’s self-refinement or showcasing our local talent to tourists. Architecture has also been valued more for its function than its contribution to fine arts, so there are not many buildings in Singapore with artistic qualities. There are a few residential buildings that combine Eastern and Western elements but which, because of an inability to manipulate the aesthetics of interior and exterior ingeniously, remain mediocre.

Within the arts, music is the most abstract and profound. At the same time, it is also the most sensitive means of expressing the sentiments of a country’s people. Singapore’s
musicians are of average standard and the music performed comprises mainly of foreign melodies. Thus, they cannot represent the local ethos. This is caused by a lack of truly soulful composers.

The situation for drama and dance is no different when compared to that of music. Invariably, what is seen in the theatre are the works of Anton Chekhov, Henrik Johan Ibsen or Cao Yu (曹禺); on the dance stage, Swan Lake, Picking Tea Leaves and Chasing Butterflies (采茶扑蝶) and Indian Deity Dance (印度神舞) are performed in turn — a completely local set of programmes do not exist.

We do not know the direction in which our creative arts are heading. If we knew, then our arts scene will no longer be vibrant. Nevertheless, in view of our historical tradition and geographical environment, it would not be difficult to conclude that the basic conditions that would help us move along a uniquely creative path already exist. From now on, let our art practitioners continue to engage in theoretical study and discussion, and to make new discoveries in their creative work.

ENDNOTES

1 Most likely the first part of The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci by Jean Paul Richter, which contains ten chapters on painting.