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at least the different government departments are overseeing each project. Hence, we sincerely wish that the relevant authorities will examine the needs of our situation and also build an arts centre that would consist of an art museum for people to visit and an arts institution to develop talents. In the past couple of years, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the various ministers have often spoken at public forums about promoting a civilised society. They have spoken on the many ways to broaden the effects of fine arts on society and life, and have greatly raised the public’s appreciation of and interest in the arts. In terms of concrete action, the Garden City Plan has been implemented. Be it in public squares or streets, there is a profusion of vibrant colours everywhere, soothing our souls and relaxing our minds. We hope to progress a step further and develop Singapore into an arts city, such that roundabouts and gardens are decorated with marble or bronze sculptures, and outstanding local paintings hang in the interiors of the City Hall building and the lobby of each commercial building. Only then can it be said that this country has a cultured and noble character.

ENDNOTES

1 This is not to be confused with the School of the Arts (SOTA), which is also known in Chinese as 新加坡艺术学院.

CHEN JEN HAO: ARTIST AND TEACHER

If Pablo Picasso had, at his prime, switched from painting to doing other work, people would not have been able to witness his outstanding artistic achievements. This is to say that for an artist to show his artistic ability, he would invariably have to undertake a long journey. If he changes his profession along the way, his opportunity for success would be greatly reduced.

Jen Hao (陈人浩) possesses strong artistic talent but was not fated to peak artistically because he took on the responsibility of educating the next generation immediately upon completing his professional training as an artist. Initially, he taught at his alma mater, the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校). It was fortuitous that the college was enveloped in an artistic atmosphere and that the students he taught all had a considerable foundation in art. Hence, Jen Hao was teaching and being taught at the same time, and his artistic creativity did not stagnate. When the Sino-Japanese War broke out, Jen Hao left Shanghai for Malaya and worked in different secondary schools. Most of the time, he took on the role of principal and was responsible for the administration of the school. His 14 years at Chung Hwa Secondary School (中化中学) in Muar and 13 years at Dunman High School (德明中学) in Singapore seriously depleted his precious time and creative energy, almost causing him to give up his art.

Jen Hao has been successful in the field of education. He has managed the schools diligently and carefully, created a pure and honest school spirit, and produced excellent results. Cohort after cohort has been accepted into higher institutions of learning in the country, some of the students have continued their education overseas, while many more have joined the work force to serve society. His is truly a rich harvest and a great contribution to the country and the people.

However, from the viewpoint of art, this is too much of a sacrifice. In educating the next generation, Jen Hao actually let the prime of his life quietly slip away. This is indeed lamentable! I dare say that had he held on to his art after returning from France and continued to ponder, paint and completely immerse himself in ink and paint, Jen Hao, as we see him today, would undoubtedly be commanding the Far East, if not the world.
Fortunately, there is a law that mandates the retirement of teachers. This September, Jen Hao will be laying down the responsibility of nurturing talents. Free from work, he will be able to completely devote his time to painting. If he can live to 90 like Qi Baishi (齐白石), there will still be 30 good years for him to fulfil his ambition.

To glimpse into Jen Hao’s future direction in creating, it would be best to understand the creative achievements of his past! That is the purpose of this essay.

In Oriental art, calligraphy and ink painting share the same genesis: their images, techniques and tools are intricately related. Hence, to study painting, one would first need to begin with the brush. Jen Hao had been influenced by his father as a boy and loved calligraphy; he had copied the calligraphy of Yan Lugong (颜鲁公), Ouyang Xun (欧阳询), Su Dongpo (苏东坡) and Wang Xizhi (王羲之) many times, and had extracted the essences from within. Yan’s forte is his sturdy calligraphic script while Ou’s merit is in his lean strokes; Dongpo is famous for being natural and unrestrained, while Xizhi is firm and smart. Jen Hao absorbed the best from all of them. It is no wonder that he has created a unique style. Generally, his calligraphy is built on a strong and stable foundation. His brushwork is smooth and simple, elegant amid the seriousness, and lively without losing the spirit of a great man. In terms of the size of his scripts and scrolls, Jen Hao’s work can be categorised as follows: his couplets best present a spirit of forceful vigour. If someone hung such a pair in the hall of his house, there would immediately be an air of boundless vitality, making one feel supremely carefree. Jen Hao’s scrolls are mostly written in running and cursive scripts. They charm art lovers most with their free-spiritedness, drifting like clouds and flowing like streams. Sometimes, he intentionally flashes a stroke or two; other times, he unwittingly displays considerable restraint, pulling his strokes back before they go over the edge. His essays and letters are outstanding, being intimate, natural, and devoid of superficiality. Many of his friends and peers have become collectors after receiving his letters and writings.

Once a person is proficient in calligraphy, he will be able to paint with great ease. Let us first talk about Jen Hao’s ink painting. He is most skilled in “writing” pines. I say “write” because a good painting, apart from image and colour, consists of technique, strength and energy of the brush. These three characteristics originate from calligraphy. Hence, one would say “to write a painting” (写画) rather than “to paint a painting” (画画) in order to express a higher quality. Throughout Chinese history, there have been many famous ink painters who were also well known for their calligraphy. On the other hand, many famous calligraphers could, through a few casual paint strokes on silk, make all the images of nature come alive. One can see that calligraphy and painting have for a long time been integrated as one. Jen Hao prefers to use cranes and pines, sparrows and bamboo, water lilies and lotuses as subject matter because it is easier to express the unique features of calligraphy with them. His pines are ancient and classical, his bamboo is frank and precise, his water lilies are gentle, quiet and beautiful, and his weathered lotuses are forceful and unrestrained. To show each of their wonders requires modulations of wrist strength, hand posture, and agility of movement before perfection is reached. This would not be obvious to non-practitioners.

Jen Hao has been through traditional training in Western painting and has been subjected to several trials before finding his own path. In his first year at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, he focused on modelling plaster statues. His teacher was a Russian whose method of instruction was based on classical methods that were unusually laborious. Every model needed to be sketched from three to four different angles — this enabled the students to understand the subtle differences of contour from different points of view and to better grasp the intrinsic nature of the object. Hence, all his students were well versed in techniques of expression. With a strong foundation, one would be able to cope easily when creating on one’s own. In his second and third years, Jen Hao progressed from inanimate plaster modelling to live nude drawing, and also from charcoal sketches to oil paintings. The students needed to carve out in detail the postures, movements and expressions of nude males and females. At the same time, they also had to study anatomy, the theory of muscles, and skin colour. Hence, regardless of subject — the aged or the strong, a weak scholar or a shy maiden — all kinds of people would be vividly expressed, as if they were emerging from the canvas. The teachers were Chen Hong (陈宏), who had returned from France, Wu Dayu (吴大雨), and Gao Leyi (高乐谊). They were pursuing Impressionism, and many of their students were thus influenced. Day in, day out, they discussed the rapid changes of light, hot and
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cold colours, and the movements of brushwork. Some of the Impressionists, such as Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, Pierre Renoir and others, were common topics for discussion.

After graduating from Shanghai, Jen Hao went to Europe for further studies. Paris was an important base and he stayed there for about five years. Owing to the rich collections in art museums, people could view artworks as if they were studying history. At the same time, there were large-scale art exhibitions and art galleries which allowed one to contemplate masterpieces by famous modern artists. Thus, Jen Hao’s technique improved rapidly and his style evolved swiftly. The main influences came from Post-Impressionists such as Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin. However, Jen Hao did not emulate blindly; rather, he made measured experimentations, retaining peacefulness, steadiness and simplicity of character. His colours were not exaggerated and his images were not deconstructed or contorted. For a short period of time, he seemed bewitched by and in love with the Fauvist works of Vlaminck. This artist, who used black and brown as his main colours, used the palette knife to carve fearsome sea waves. That terrifying atmosphere and wild and aggressive momentum easily provokes strong feelings in the human heart. It is little wonder that Jen Hao was mesmerised. This could well be the reason that he subsequently used the palette knife when painting. During his sojourn in Paris, Jen Hao’s works were selected for the Salon d’Automne every year. This is sufficient proof that his creative achievements had attained a world standard. The principal of the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, Liu Haisu (刘海粟), was then in Europe to view art. When he saw that his prized student had performed excellently, he invited Jen Hao to teach at his alma mater. Although he longed for a life of artistic creation, Jen Hao obeyed his teacher. This was the beginning of his sacrificing of his art for the cause of education.

Jen Hao’s emotional ups and downs, as well as his changes in subject matter, can be seen from a review of his works over the past few decades. However, the main thread of his style remains. Although he lived in Europe for many years, Jen Hao never abandoned the intrinsic spirit of his land. He painted in oil, but with a rich and unique Oriental flavour. His compositions focus on the creation of an atmosphere, and pay attention to the real and the unreal; his colours are refreshing and elegant, vibrant and lively. His use of the brush frequently reveals the flavour of Ou, Su, Yan and Wang, espousing the brilliant tradition of Chinese culture that is several thousand years old. To have such energy and deep cultivation is like seeking treasures with the key in hand; one is bound to succeed.
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