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Published by National Gallery Singapore

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Western Painting in Singapore in the Last 45 Years

Western painting originated during the Middle Ages in Europe. As it was under the purview of the clergy, it served a religious function. Painting only experienced an awakening in the 15th and 16th centuries during Italy’s Renaissance when it began to use man as its primary subject, creating many masterpieces which were rich in life. Thereafter, seventeenth-century Flanders and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and Spain shone brilliantly, teeming with talented artists. The 20th century is a developmental period of modern art. England, Germany, and Italy each have their outstanding heroes. However, Paris remains the central force.

Naturally, the other European countries each had their own trends and styles. Their standards, however, were ordinary, and their art was unable to gain currency.

American culture was a continuation of the old continent’s. During the initial period of independence, it could only emulate. There was no creative impulse. By the mid-twentieth century, however, it was able to distance itself from Britain, creating its own movement and forming an avant-garde art enclave outside Paris.

As a result of rapid developments in transportation and the broadcast media, communication and cultural interaction made unceasing progress. Western fine arts was like mercury falling on the ground, flowing into every crevice — there was not a country that did not come under its influence.

A post-Meiji Japan absorbed European culture as much as it could, leading to the appearance of Western paintings in the country. Thanks to concerted and systematic promotion, Japan has from early on secured a regional lead in Western painting.

Official Western art education in China started about 60 years ago, during the early Republican period. At that time, key cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou saw the establishment of fine art academies, with separate classes for Eastern and Western art. The classes in Western art were started to meet the needs of the times. As Western art techniques were completely different from traditional Chinese painting techniques, these classes attracted many students and were very much in vogue. All the instructors were graduates from schools in Western Europe and Japan.

Although various places in Nanyang such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines established fine art academies, they were less than perfect. Moreover, during the colonial period, the Chinese viewed themselves as residents of a foreign land, there to earn a living. Thus, all overseas Chinese looked to China as the leader. It was only natural, then, for one to return to China if one wanted to pursue further studies in art.

Western painting in Singapore is precisely the product of those who came to Singapore after graduating from fine art academies in China.

In reality, prior to the arrival of this group of new graduates, Western painting had already existed in Singapore. Academics in transit, fine arts teachers in schools, commercial artists, and others had created various types of artworks. However, there was neither sound organisation nor clear goals in promoting art. An effective force could not be developed.

People may recall the first head of the art department of Raffles Institution, Mr Walker. Mr Walker was a realist painter who had been influenced by Impressionism and who nurtured many students, including Lim Cheng Hoe (林清河), a pioneer artist who was educated in the English language. Mr Walker’s students, however, served in different government departments and lacked contact with each other. They have never organised any sizeable exhibitions.

On the other hand, the fine arts students who returned from Shanghai and Hangzhou formed groups to promote interaction among themselves and to champion art. The first art group that was formed is known today as the Society of Chinese Artists (中华美术研究会), which is now already 45 years old.

It may be said that from 1935 onwards, except for the years of the Japanese Occupation (1942–1945), an exhibition was held every year to entice people into a world of elegance and to encourage members to work hard at their creations. In terms of quantity, there
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Those who assumed the responsibility of initiation were art groups such as the Society of Chinese Artists, Singapore Art Society (新加坡艺术协会), Modern Art Society (现代画会), Singapore Watercolour Society, and the newly established Printmaking Society (版画会), among others. The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (南洋美术专科学校) is an institution of learning that is responsible for two important missions: nurturing artists and promoting art. Apart from the Modern Art Society, which solely champions modern art, all other organisations encompass both old and new in their outlook and allow for freedom of expression.

In order to summarise the developments in Western painting in Singapore in the last 45 years, there is a need to list a few artists as examples.

First, we shall talk about Tchang Ju Chi (张汝器) who, for several terms, was president of the Society of Chinese Artists in its early years. After graduating from the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校), he went to France for further studies. His realistic oil paintings are characterised by charming colours, an elegant and gentle style, and the meticulous depiction of subject. An exemplification of this is his portrayal of the life of the Bataks of Sumatra, which is also his representative work. Prior to the Japanese invasion, Ju Chi produced a painting of the Imperial Japanese Army raping women in China. In exposing the atrocities committed by the Japanese, he employed a presentation technique that was realistic, yet subtle. It impelled the overseas Chinese to raise funds for the war resistance effort in China. Little was Ju Chi to know that his endeavours would cost him his life. Not long after the Japanese entered Singapore, Ju Chi, together with his younger sister's husband Zhuang Youzhao (莊有钊), were executed at Changi Beach. This was an unprecedented tragedy for the art community in Singapore.

If we look at them in terms of pure functionality, prints are small and effective. They can be replicated into tens or hundreds of copies and are easily disseminated. Gouache is casual, bright and lovable, but cannot be kept for a long period. Watercolour is straightforward and fluent, suitable for lively depictions of scenery. However, its berth for expression is limited. These three media belong to the category of minor works, unlike oil painting, which can be large in scale and which is able to portray objects with accuracy and detail. Oil possesses a majestic and bold spirit and can be expressed in many varied styles. If we were to say that Oriental art is represented by ink painting, then, undoubtedly, Western art finds its exemplification in oil painting. Acrylic, on the other hand, is a newly developed product which is popular in North America. Its character lies between oil and watercolour. It is most suitable for presenting abstract works, but its sole drawback is its lack of a ballast.

In general, the evolution of Western art in Singapore may be divided into the pre-war and post-war periods. The pre-war period was dominated by Realist and Post-Impressionist styles. Occasionally, Fauvist and Cubist works appeared. In the post-war period, besides the continued presence of these styles, abstract painting started to make ingress into the domain of art through many young artists who had returned from overseas, and who were strongly propounding their brand new positions.
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At that time, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) had just been established. With Principal Lim Hak Tai (林学大) at the helm dealing with the miserable circumstances they were under, the school began to take on some sense of scale. The majority of its classes were on Western painting. As a result, new blood was nurtured, and these students are now the main active force in Singapore’s art community.
As for myself, I have loved Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, and have also been infatuated with Henri Matisse. They have inclined me to adopt an optimistic and open-minded approach. The Society of Chinese Artists once held an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall prior to the war. Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿) visited the exhibition, and upon seeing my new works, could not refrain from exclaiming, “You are the real teacher of Matisse.” Although I felt extremely flattered, I could not regard that statement as truth. My aspiration in art has always comprised the following tenets: strong foundation in skill, a vibrant demeanour, an open mind. Subject matter and composition are secondary.

Beihong once stayed in Singapore for a short period of time. He also held an exhibition here during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). It is inevitable that he has had some influence on art in Singapore. As Beihong is firmly grounded in realist techniques, he is able to manage any subject matter with confidence. His portraits are particularly outstanding, and a number of his large compositions are of a certain standard. These give the local audience a corresponding understanding of Western painting. This is especially so for young artists, who are moved to work towards building up a strong foundation through long-term study.

Shortly after Xu Beihong’s visit, the principal of the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, the great master Liu Haisu (刘海粟), came to Singapore to grace an art exhibition. Haisu’s modern spirit is vastly different from Xu’s air of academicism. Haisu uses strong colours, his running script racing freely, emphasising not the portrayal of appearance but the display of boldness. This endows the audience with unlimited spiritual inspiration and liberation, and also allows the younger generation of artists to grasp the true essence of style and charm.

Singapore’s modern art has been practised, at the outset, by artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Thomas Yeo (姚照宏), Yeh Chi Wei (叶之威), Anthony Poon (方谨顺) and others, each of whom has their characteristic style. However, they all entered the field independently. Thus, their influence appeared disorganised until the establishment of the Modern Art Society more than ten years ago. Only then did their influence become a force to be reckoned with. On one hand, the Modern Art Society aroused an interest...
Cheong Soo Pieng 舒新城 served for a long time at NAFA as a Western art teacher and had a major influence on his students. His painting style was constantly changing, and his students followed suit. He has tried Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, Cubist, and abstract styles. He has now returned to sentimental realism, infusing oil painting with the characteristics of Indonesian painting to create a unique style. Soo Pieng frequently depicts the scenery and people of Bali, Sabah, Malaya, and Singapore in his paintings. His paintings are exquisite and simple, brimming with the flavours of the south.

Chen Wen Hsi 陈文希 is an artist who is equally well versed in Chinese and Western painting. Wen Hsi and I were classmates in Shanghai’s Xinhua Arts Academy (新华艺术专科学校). During that period, we exhibited together at a national fine art exhibition. After coming to the south, Wen Hsi taught at NAFA and the Overseas Chinese Middle School (新加坡南洋华侨中学校). He is now the director of two sophisticated art galleries and paints in his spare time. Wen Hsi’s oil paintings are deeply influenced by Georges Braque and Paul Klee, among others, and he always produces surprising concepts. The compositions, colours and brushwork in his works reveal his exceptional skill. A great master now stands proudly on this island.

Chen Chong Swee 陈宗瑞 can be said to be the longest serving member in the field of art education. He is highly accomplished in his devoted study of ink and oil paintings, and his greatest contribution is his active promotion of watercolour painting. Chong Swee often paints large works. His unique talent lies in his use of compact structures and sombre colours.

Chen Jen Hao 陈人浩 and I were classmates in the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, after which we proceeded to France together for further studies. After we returned, we both accepted the offer to serve at our alma mater. As Jen Hao had deep insights in calligraphy, he particularly emphasised the use of brushwork. People had the impression that he was using colour materials to write on the canvas. Whether he was painting fruits, trees or stones, the character of his brushwork was evident. Even when he was painting a moving beast or human figures, he would not forget to display the energy of the brush.

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in artists to create, and on the other hand, it helped to raise the level of art appreciation among the public. The contributions of Ho Ho Ying (何和应) and Wee Beng Chong (黄明宗) have been most significant.

The establishment of the Singapore Watercolour Society has meant that work in this field has improved by leaps and bounds. Gog Sing Hooi (吴承惠), Low Puay Hua (刘培和), Hua Chai Yong (潘再雄) and Leng Joon Wong (凌运风), among others, have each progressed in different directions.

The Printmaking Society was just formed in the middle of this year. It has held one exhibition, which was also its maiden exhibition. This exhibition amassed great and noteworthy works from both Singapore and other countries, but, perhaps owing to insufficient publicity or the absence of such a culture, failed to generate a strong response.

While Western painting in Singapore has not had a long history, it has been evolving very rapidly. What others gained in a few centuries of cultivation, we have achieved in four to five decades. This, of course, is taking an optimistic view of things. We are more or less always following in the footsteps of Europe and the United States — this is regardless of whether one is conservative or avant-garde. We seem to have lost our roots and the essence of our intrinsic nature. This has led some to express their concerns about the establishment of a Singaporean style, of whether one should play up one’s Oriental sensibility, express the character of one’s people, and trumpet the colours of one’s locality. This is an issue that is worthy of deep consideration.

ENDNOTES
1 Richard Walker was appointed art master of government English schools in 1923. In 1937, Walker’s designation was changed to Art Superintendent, Singapore Schools. He taught art to the teachers and students of Raffles Institution.
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