

# ASIAN ART

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## ASIAN ART CHINESE PAINTING

'FOLLOWING TRADITION slavishly should not always be the (artist's) goal. He must break away from tradition to create his own style.' Singapore artist Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991) once said. Steeped in the Chinese painting tradition, he was equally at home with the major European artistic movements of the 20th century. In Southeast Asia, Chen was a pioneer of the blending of both disciplines. His oeuvre reflects the metamorphosis of styles, which formed the Nanyang or 'southern seas' school. To celebrate his birth centenary, the Singapore Art Museum pays homage in a commemorative retrospective entitled *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition*. A selection of 123 paintings drawn from the museum's own collection and from holdings in Singapore, Taiwan and China, navigate his working methods developed first in China and transplanted to Singapore after the war. These paintings can be seen as a tacit statement of his singular

Chen Wen Hsi's canvas was a dialogue with the circumstances of his life. By an accident of time and place, he was swept by artistic currents taking place in China in the first half of the 20th century. Born in Guangdong, south China, and trained in the cosmopolitan Shanghai of the mid-1920s, Chen was exposed to the intense debate taking place about the role art would play in modern China. In an era less affected by change, he would not have been open to the new and exciting possibilities before him. China's need for reform had been challenged by the encounter, in previous decades, with a technologically advanced west. The challenge extended to the Chinese artistic and literary tradition, felt sorely to be in need of change. From it Chen had already absorbed the core principles of the brush and ink, such as 'copying by transmission', one of six laws considered *de rigueur*, by the art historian Xie He (active circa 500-535). In Shanghai, new-fangled critics dismissed them as antiquated. There were two possibilities, adapt and modernise Chinese art or reject it altogether in favour of western art deemed 'progressive'. At the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Chen's mentors clung to 'new Chinese painting', *xinguo hua*, as a compromise. Also known as the Lingnan school, it looked towards Japan, held up as a model of having successfully integrated the best of both worlds. Birds and flowers, monkeys and owls, were exemplary Lingnan themes, as interpreted by Chen in *Two Monkeys and Peacock and Peahen*.

Chen did not always bow to convention. Daring brushwork and asymmetrical compositions intrigued him. Chen much admired the work of the Ming dynasty monk-painter Bada Shanren (1626-1705), known for his semi-abstract brushwork and use of distortion. He adapted Bada Shanren's use of asymmetry and brushwork in *Birds on a Rock*. He was also influenced, in large part, by the Qing master, Xugu's (1824-96) depictions of nature.

At the academy, Chen had been introduced to the Chinese technique of finger painting, which would remain with him throughout his life. Finger painting was an enduring, if minor, artistic tradition, first referred to during the Tang dynasty (618-906) and did not have a significant following until the early Qing (1644-1911). The sensation of direct contact with paper was a feat Chen felt the brush could not accomplish, describing it as 'archaic simplicity' in itself. He cultivated the finger's ability - which held ink sparingly - to create broken and unpredictable lines. Bolder visually than continuous lines of ink, they encouraged Chen to experiment with bird finger paintings, exploited to great effect in *Egrets with Banana Tree*, which contained subtle colour as well as a tropical flavour.

The most international city in China, Shanghai's art academies espoused European principles of linear perspective, realism and drawing and painting from life. Western-style realism was appreciated as 'scientific'. It was applied to different media ranging from European sculpture to oil painting



FLYING GULLS, undated, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 52 x 56.5 cm. Private collection

## Convergences Chen Wen Hsi



BIRDS ON A ROCK, undated (c. early 1960s, on or before 1964), hanging scroll, ink on paper, 53.2 x 56.7 cm. Private collection

and photography. The Impressionist palette demanded painting in the open to study the effects of light and colour. Chen began practising Western-style life drawing and sketching from the mid-1920s, because 'art had to be informed by life'. He rarely dated his works. *Seated Female Nude* and *Lying Female Nude* are two early studies he made in Shanghai.

Lesser artists could have been intimidated by the intrusion of Western art, but Chen only saw parallels and chose to merge them with the Chinese tradition. Western principles offered a new way of looking at things, which was not at odds, in substance, with the Chinese emphasis on close observation of nature. Only the emerging style, depending

on the medium used, varied. To make a fresh statement, Chen began to frame what he saw. He dismissed the Chinese landscape painting convention, *shanshui hua*, and the use of texture strokes, *cunfa*. Using freer brushwork, more vivid colours and the western single fixed-point perspective, he produced Chinese 'scenic painting', *fengjing hua*. *View of the Town and Village with Stupa*, are studies in ink and brush on square format paper, adopting Western principles.

With reference to his innovations, Chen recalled, 'When I first studied art, I naturally didn't have any style or special feelings. It pleased me just to achieve life likenesses. After quite a long time, I began to feel that I had to have a face of my own. How exactly am

I to paint? How might I do something more outstanding than what others have done?'

These experiments laid the groundwork for his subsequent life in Singapore. Arriving there in the late 1940s, he found the colonial societies of Southeast Asia experiencing the winds of change. His initial engagement with the new world of Nanyang was via social commentary and the western concepts that he had imbibed in Shanghai seemed most appropriate to it: 'My foundation in Chinese painting is rooted in China, whereas my training in western painting was perfected in Singapore.'

Until the 1950s, Southeast Asian or Nanyang artists were experimenting with the representational style, a convention favoured at the time. The tropical location with its intense light, lush landscapes and the mingling of races, was an explosion of colour. They left Chen exploring a series of oils such as *The Ferry and Waitress*. But representation was not enough. 'What I paint goes beyond mere representation. There has to be a 'spirit' in it,' he said. 'We must respect the objective form in painting, as it is after all, the lingua franca of the artist ... the question is, how to project the 'self' of the artist in the process of depicting the likeness of an object?'

Taking inspiration from the everyday and the commonplace, Chen sought to change the way objects were perceived. The concepts of mass, space, form and rhythm from his western training gave him scope for experiment. Cubism and Fauvism with their emphasis on subjectivism, seemed most suited to Chen's ideals. Taken by the Cubist idea of deconstructivism, he fragmented and distorted subjects - in a space with no specific light source - into their basic geometric forms, as in *Still Life*, a platter of fish on a table. It led one observer to remark in 1956: 'Chen Wen Hsi is fascinated with man-made things. A master of clutter, he loves the ramshackle and the tumbledown, such as the littered chaos of a junkyard, always stressing the interplay of light on planes.'

Chen utilised Fauvism's subversion of rules by dissolving structures. He exploited colours by conveying them as forces in



HERONS, 1988, oil on canvas, 243.8 x 305.2 cm. Collection of Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Singapore

themselves. *Oasis* from 1972 is but a rich mosaic of green, red and black. *Herons* is dominated by forceful splashes of colours and forms on a blue background. Chen was given to pronounce, 'You don't have to use a brush at all. Recently I have been using other things ... I embed flowers or other objects on the brush and it dabs wonderfully...'

In the 1960s/1970s, formalism was the artistic language of the post-colonial, newly independent societies of Southeast Asia. Singapore was no exception. Painting looked not at content but at formal qualities including textures, shapes and colours. Chen however was beginning to turn to abstraction. In *Abstract Cranes*, an exercise of white, black and brown forms suspended on a blue background, figuration is reduced to a minimum. Modern abstract art, he said, '... abandoned traditional compositional methods and reinvented an imaginary language that amalgamates materialism and idealism. Abstract art thus destroys the 'realness' of objective forms. Its aim is to reveal the inner spirit of humanity or the so-called 'psychological space'.

Referring to these experiments in 1983, he said: 'I took off from Impressionism, and dabbled a little in Romanticism. I had tried other styles. I experimented with Fauvism, Expressionism and later, Cubism too. For a while, I was post-Impressionist and Post-Expressionist. I don't adhere strictly to anything. Depending on what my materials are good for, I'd switch to the appropriate style and do not necessarily stick closely to any particular one. I've tried every style.'

Chen's preoccupation with modernism did not mean a rejection of his early love for Chinese literati painting. After he made his home in Singapore he continued to develop using the dry brush. In the scholar-artist tradition, *yuan* - the generic term for gibbons, monkeys and apes - symbolic of a less than worldly existence, was held in much esteem. After he chanced upon a gibbon at a local pet shop, he was infatuated from the 1950's onwards with depictions of the animal. He began rearing pet gibbons to observe them and his own menagerie provided the inspiration for *Call of the Gibbons* and *Two Gibbons*.

In the last decades of his life, Chen returned to his Chinese roots with a vengeance. But therein lies a difference. He turned to abstraction, infusing its elements into birds, Egrets, herons and ducks were transformed: '... people have commented that the egrets I paint have elongated bodies. To me, these are not egrets from real life but imaginary ones ... by lengthening the body of the egret, it appears more graceful. These practices are considered distorted and exaggerated forms of beauty in art.' In *Three Herons*, he deliberately lengthened the birds' heads and beaks. He seemed oblivious to eyes and beaks

together in *Abstract Herons*, a composition of mere diagonal lines on a plane, juxtaposed against a background mosaic of orange, purple and blue. *Herons* is almost totally abstract, a flat patterning of forms.

Chen also experimented with the traditional void in Chinese painting, suggesting water or air, by deliberately leaving space blank. To suggest tension, he occasionally used the void in the reverse, outlining his subjects on negative space. While he defended the Chinese literati tradition, he knew it could only be modernised if he abandoned pre-existing rules. Abstraction made it susceptible to change. Freed from its shackles, he ventured into new horizons in Nanyang with no baggage from the past.

YVONNE TAN

Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition is at the Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore 189555, until 8 April, [www.singart.com](http://www.singart.com)



THREE HERONS, undated (circa 1950 to 1960, on or before 1964), hanging scroll, ink on paper, 94.5 x 37.5 cm. Private collection