

The Brushwork of a Spirited Master - on the art of Chao Shao-an
Dr. Ho Fung-lin

When Chao Shao-an (1905-1998) was interviewed by *The Lighthouse Magazine* in 1957⁽¹⁾, he spoke at length his experiences as a creative artist. He pointed out in that interview his belief that "Chinese painting is at the pinnacle of art"⁽²⁾. He was then making a statement, coming to a conclusion regarding Chinese painting based on decades of explorations and his experiences abroad. Being generous and modest in temperament⁽³⁾, Chao was merely putting forth his own views, passing judgments on the arguments as a person in modern times on whether Chinese art is superior to Western art or vice versa. In that interview, Chao did not digress on the characteristics of the two very different streams of art.

Two years later, Chao divulged more clearly upon the differences, using his painting of a tiger as an example. He was of the opinion that "Western art tends to be rather dull when it comes to brushstrokes, while its application of colours tends to be stilted. It dwells on the form, and lacked spirit, very different from Chinese painting."⁽⁴⁾

If this is so, then this is another way of saying "Chinese painting is at the pinnacle of art". Western art is inferior to Chinese art not only in terms of brushstrokes and application of colours, it "lacked spirit" when attempting to achieve the total painterly effect. In this, Chao emphasized specifically the "dwelling on forms" - the pursuit for likeness rather than infusing the likeness with wit and personality. The use of brushes and ink is very different to the Western approach to form and colours. In short, the importance put upon the use of ink and brushes is unique to Chinese painting and is totally absent in Western art. The comparison between Chinese and Western painting had remained a controversial subject for more than a hundred years. The Qing Dynasty artist Zheng Ji (active around 1866) once declared: "If one considers Western painting as superior to our own Confucian painting, it showed the person's ignorance to the profundity of brush and ink. How can one paint without ink and brush? There is no finesse of brushwork to speak of in Western paintings, nor do they comprehend the intricacies of ink. They go after the form of the object, a mere concern for likeness."⁽⁵⁾

It is obvious that both Chao Shao-an and Zheng Ji were talking about the same thing. Both maintained that the greatest difference between Chinese and Western paintings lies in the former's use of ink and brush. This in turn, illustrated the way Chinese artists looked at Western art. The influx of Western learning was the cause of this one sided view as the Chinese became skeptical towards their own culture. The subsequent cultural movements in the early years of the

Republic were direct outcomes of such skepticisms. The impact on traditional culture was momentous.⁽⁶⁾

The painter Lin Shu (1852-1924), still active in the early years of the Republic, had this to say in regard to the impact of the new culture upon Chinese painting: "With the coming of the new learning, many scholars had gone abroad to further their studies, despising their own culture. Even when shown a masterpiece, they looked dumbfounded. There is no way that one can talk about painting."⁽⁷⁾ What Lin Shu described was typical of his time, especially the attitude towards Chinese art, which bordered upon ignorance. Chao Shao-an's remark then, was his own contemplation upon the subject, and also a solid conclusion after years of exploration.

Chao's view was drawn from practical experiences. In the interview "Steps in Painting a Tiger", his persisting view that Chinese paintings are far superior found a convincing rationale. To paint a tiger, the crux of the matter was that "it is not difficult to paint a fearsome tiger, but to impart a tiger's ferocity with humanity."⁽⁸⁾

Prior to painting the tiger, Chao assumed

that the tiger has a gentle side, before proceeding to portray the brutality of the beast. The gentleness is a sign of humanity, whereas brutality signifies the primeval instinct. The tiger is no longer just a fearsome animal, but a humanized beast which Chao characterized through its eyes. He "wet the paper before painting the eyes, to achieve a slight bleeding effect" which "couples gentleness with ferocity."⁽⁹⁾ Chao's fine craftsmanship in portraying the gentle glint in the beast's eyes is best illustrated in the painting *Tiger* (Fig. 1).

To capture the vigorous energy of the tiger, the dexterous maneuver of brush and ink is also evident in rendering the animal as a total being. As Chao maintained: "It depends on how lively one handles the brush when painting the stripes to give the tiger life. You have to pay attention to how close or how sparse the stripes are aligned in the composition to add to its spirit."⁽¹⁰⁾

The liveliness of Chao's brush is also evident in the drawing of the animal's contour. Chao chose to sketch the tiger with long tipped hard bristle brushes. The long tipped brush, when properly used, depend to a great extent to the manipulation of the wrist, so as to achieve a springing action that makes the lines "light and elegant".⁽¹¹⁾ The varying shades of ink on the other hand, gave the tiger body and volume. When Chao spoke of his dependence on brushstrokes to give the tiger liveliness through its stripes, what he meant was actually one should be proficient both in ink and brush.

The grassy marsh in which the tiger hides is the next on agenda after painting the tiger. The varying shades of ink gave the tall grass a layering effect. Chao's brushwork here is even more agile than when he paints the tiger, bringing out a sense of motion. Contrasted with the crouching tiger, the combination of the static and the active brought about a kind of dramatic tension, which highlighted the menacing power of the tiger lying in wait for its prey. Chao's brushwork demonstrated its lack of "dullness" as compared to Western painting technique.

Chao is of the opinion that the application of colours should be "light but weighty" when discussing the colouring of the tiger.⁽¹²⁾ This sounds contradictory but the "weightiness" is only in the visual sense. Chao applied the colours in layers of washes, achieving an effect that is full-bodied but without the heaviness of repeated applications. He aimed to "keep the colours light and transparent, so as to illuminate the picture."⁽¹³⁾ When the picture is illuminated, then the "stilted" effect of coagulated colours evident in Western paintings could be avoided.

As for bestowing upon the tiger a touch of gentleness, apart from the metaphorical intentions, conveys in no obscure terms Chao's view on art: "To enlighten through the beauty of art, transforming the base into the lofty, and the violent into the compassionate."⁽¹⁴⁾ A discourse on painting a tiger can be quite a revelation.

In "Steps of Painting a Tiger", Chao focused mostly on the technique and means of expression when discussing the differences between Chinese and Western art. In an interview, entitled "Chao Shao-an Returns from America", conducted in 1961, his attention turned to the theoretical.⁽¹⁵⁾ This is a result of his studying of the directions the two different streams. He declared, when talking about the modern American art that he had seen, that he "advocates creativity, but not the outlandish and attention seeking."⁽¹⁶⁾ In discussing modern Western art, he was keen on pointing out the unique features of the Chinese concept of creativity: "Art is very much an outcome of inspiration, which in a few spontaneous strokes, gives rise to spirited and affecting works. As for the so-called modern art which is laboured and took months to complete, might be impressive in terms of application of colours, but lacked on the whole the spontaneity and is not inspired, more like the works of artisans."⁽¹⁷⁾

It is natural that Chao spoke of modern Western art from the standpoint of Chinese paintings, since he is a Chinese painter through and through. The creative modes and concepts of Chinese and Western art are so different, it is almost impossible to make comparisons. However, Chao's comments underscored the crucial features of inspiration and brushwork in Chinese painting, especially the emphasis on spontaneity as oppose to the laboured and manipulated tendencies of modern Western art. On the other hand, Chao is also against the so-called "graffiti" style of modern painting, which he found irrelevant. In terms of forms and styles, Chao maintained, "the true beauty of painting lies not in the exact likeness to the painted object, but the ability to transcend the form of the object so as to achieve a state of true essence and spirit."⁽¹⁸⁾

It is obvious that Chao is opposed to both the "graffiti" style of painting and the rigid adherence to portraying the exact likeness. Instead he favoured the traditional Chinese ideal of



Fig. 1
Tiger, 1965,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum



Fig. 2
Skull in a faded dream, 1955,
Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art

paintings. It is harmful if you do."⁽²²⁾ The kind of Western art Song Nian came across would be very different from what Chao saw many decades later, but both described Western art as works of "artisans" and "craftsmen". Song Nian elaborated further on the subject: "Western artisans go after exact likeness, striving to make things appear life-like. But if one studies their works more carefully, they are merely effects achieved by layered application of shades and colours, very distinctive in terms of light and shadows, making the objects stand out. If one were not informed, one would easily be taken in by the apparent resemblance to the real objects. This is but a trick. Once you understand the workings of light and shadows, there is little that Western paintings can offer."⁽²³⁾ To Song Nian, the superiority of Chinese paintings stems from "the emphasis on brushworks and strokes, produced in one holistic breathe of energy which covered both form and spirit."⁽²⁴⁾

The dependence of Chinese painting on brushwork and spontaneous inspiration, as opposed to the meticulous shading and tinting of Western paintings, is in many ways a subjection to accidental effects, the much emphasized "transcendence" arising upon the encounter of the mind and the object that results in a "holistic breathe of energy which covered both form and spirit." The workings of the mind is often stressed in Chinese art, which appeared to be lacking in the fastidiously rendered Western art was to Song Nian the act of artisans, an opinion shared by Chao. Such comparisons seem



Fig. 4
Dragonfly and autumn reeds, 1930s,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

"transcendence", the act of "painting the essence apart from mere resemblance."⁽¹⁹⁾ It is the essence that is important⁽²⁰⁾, and in Chao's words, the "true spirit" or "true beauty".

As for the modern artwork Chao had seen in America, he concluded that they are "out of bound both in terms of theory and rationale, products of subjectivity and willfulness."⁽²¹⁾ He is of the opinion that the artist should be subjected to certain restrictions - that of theory which is derived from traditional, and rationale which is the order of Nature. In other words, the artist has to put himself within the bounds of these two objectives in order to attain true spirit and true beauty.

The fact that Chao made such comparisons between Chinese and Western art is because he is a painter. As such, the comparisons are natural outcomes of his reasoning, which are evolved from earlier concepts in Chinese painting. He once quoted the words of Song Nian (active around 1897), a Qing Dynasty painter: "When discussing painting with my friends, almost all of them despised Western paintings and considered them works of artisans. As for me, I am adamant that there is no need to learn from Western paintings. In fact, one should never learn from Western



Fig. 5
Gladioli, 1968, Collection of The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

conclusion Chao came upon is "Chinese artistic theories are more profound than any foreign theories, and their standings in the realm of art would far exceed those of other nations in the future."⁽²⁵⁾

Years of experience have given rise to the above remark, which brought about the proclamation that "Chinese painting is at the pinnacle of art". Chinese and Western art followed their own destined paths; what Chao maintained is simply that Chinese painters should be confident enough to bring about revitalization of their own tradition without the introduction of Western elements. In his own way, Chao sought enlightenment in traditional theories, and expressed himself through brushwork.

Since he put special emphasis on brushwork, Chao Shao-an considered the brush as an instrument that "expresses not just matters but also poetry, experience, learnedness and personality."⁽²⁶⁾ His concern is not with the technique of the brush, but the artistic insight of Chinese painting. A painting should show not just the subtlety and sophistication of the images, but also the inner qualities such as poetry and learnedness - elements that reveal the personality of the painter. Poetry in fact, is often the clue to the painter's motive and a source of inspiration, a discreet force that infuse a painting with feeling and interest. Take for example the painting *Skull in a faded dream* (Fig.2), which is obviously inspired by a Tang Dynasty poem :

*While heroically battling the Huns,
An entire army perished among the alien dust.
Pity the crumbling, drifting remains,
That lived still in a loving wife's dreams.*

Touched by the poem, the painter proceeded to paint this painting. Chao himself had experienced the perils of war, so *Skull in a faded dream* is in many ways an expression of his own suffering. The skull in the painting is the war dead, whose souls are condemned to wander the alien battlefields. The white azaleas are Chao's own additions, standing for offerings to the fallen soldiers. His brushwork give forth a sadness that moves the viewer with its sense of compassion, which is to say, through the skillful mastery of the brush, Chao revealed his own sentiment and personality. Such profound skill can only be the accumulation of the artist's learning and experience, which demonstrated very well his remark that a brush can "expresses not just matters but also poetry, experience, learnedness and personality."

To Chao Shao-an, the brush is a very versatile instrument. He once remarked: "Be it the sturdy bamboo, the tender willow, the rambling vine or the splendid flower, all can be expressed through the stroke of a single brush."⁽²⁷⁾ This is true of course, if one is adept in the manipulation of the brush. From the sturdy to the tender, the variations of a brushstroke can metamorphose from one extreme to another. The bamboo in *Bamboo and sparrow* (Fig.3) is a very good illustration of Chao Shao-an's sturdy brushwork - it is a blending of power and suppleness that characterized the elastic strength of bamboos. The weeds in *Dragonfly and autumn weeds* (Fig. 4) on the other hand, demonstrated Chao's pliant, tender touch. It is the direct opposite of the bamboo, and is rendered as strength infused within the suppleness, with hidden energy ensuing from the soft touch. As an example of Chao's ability to impart splendour in his brushwork, *Gladioli* (Fig.5) stands apart from the two previous paintings in that it adheres to neither strength nor suppleness, but to show the flowers in their full glory and at the same time, bring out the

out of place in the present age and times. Besides, both Chinese and Western art developed according to their own traditions and backgrounds that made the comparisons futile in many respects. The fact that Chao Shao-an made such comparisons is very much his own summation of years of practice and exploration - is it at all necessary to absorb elements of Western art to improve Chinese art? The



Fig. 3
Bamboo and sparrow, 1989,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum



Fig. 6
By the lotus pond, 1960s,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

tactile elements of the flowers' texture. Chao is a master in conjuring the natural character of objects.

But the magic of Chao's brushwork is not restricted to those listed above: "The 'one brushstroke' is what I considered the utmost wonder. In one stroke, you can manage to bring out a multitude of shades both light and dark, as well as the constantly changing colours."⁽²⁸⁾ This appears to be a very apt description of Chao's *Gladioli*. He worked marvels with the metamorphosing shades in just

one skillful stroke. Chao elaborated further in regard to brushwork: "Just a few strokes, and the object you intended to paint will be manifested in its full glory."⁽²⁹⁾ Indeed, brushwork is to Chao "the basic technique" in Chinese painting. "An artist who had never studied brushwork with care," he maintained, "can never be a good artist."⁽³⁰⁾ As for the actual manipulation of the brush, he is of the opinion that "the vertical tip is the proper one, and the appropriate one to use for Chinese paintings. When using the slanted tip, you can never achieve the wondrous 'limpid and rounded' touch so unique to Chinese painting."⁽³¹⁾

The "limpid and rounded" effect is best illustrated in the painting *By the lotus pond* (Fig.6). In this album leaf, Chao combined the "boneless" (brushwork without outline) with the outlined to paint his lotus leaf and lotus flower. The vertical tip technique is the main feature in his brushstrokes. The lotus stalks are done in the artist's much exhorted "limpid and rounded" manner, but the same cannot be said in his treatment of leaf, the flower and the weeds, which are neither limpid nor rounded. The use of vertical tip is considered the only method as Chinese painters often paint with their wrists hovering in mid-air while holding their brushes. This is also a means to train beginners, a means that prevented them from deviating from the proper technique, hence "the appropriate one" according to Chao. But this is not the case with *Gladioli*, in



Fig. 7
Yellow hibiscus,
Not dated, Collection of The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

which Chao used slanted tip. As a matter of fact, Chao alternates between the vertical and the slanted tips when he paints, but he emphasized the vertical. In the use of brushes, the vertical tip is the norm, whereas the slanted tip is the alternative.

Chao's use of colours is also evident in *Gladioli*. The flowers in the foreground for instance, dazzled with a multitude of shades. The effect seemed complicated at a glance, but to Chao, the use of colours depended much on simplicity: "In Chinese painting, colours are actually quite simple. Basically, you have just red, white, yellow, ocher, blue and black. With just three of these basic colours, you can produce a myriad of colours."⁽³²⁾ The flowers and the mantis in *Gladioli* display a rich variety of hues and shades, which are achieved through simple blending of basic colours. Chao's philosophy on colours is very well demonstrated in this painting.

Unlike *Gladioli*, which is rendered entirely with colours, many of Chao's works are painted with the combined use of colour and ink. *Yellow hibiscus* (Fig.7) is an example of the latter. The

painting itself exhibits a subtle elegance, and the splendour of the yellow hibiscus flowers is clearly not the major objective. But contrasted with the leaves, painted in black ink, the flowers seductively arrested the viewer's attention. The combination of ink and colour can be unique in its artistic effects. Chao had made extensive studies of ink. He once expounded thus upon the importance of ink in Chinese painting: "Ink is both sublime and subtle. Just imagine that one can only use one colour to express a range of shades from light to dark - that is not easy."⁽³³⁾ To Chao, the ink is both subtle and sublime simply because it is just as expressive as colour. The fact that painting with ink is not easy lies in the fact that "in one swift stroke, all the meanings must be fully expressed."⁽³⁴⁾ The painter may understand adequately the variations of ink tones, but he has to be skillful enough to express the delicate nuances. Chao elaborated further: "Take for example when painting a bamboo branch, one has to show not just a sense of moral integrity, but also the refreshing feeling of sunshine after the rain."⁽³⁵⁾ Of these two maxims, the former is considered in terms of an abstract metaphor to give the painting a more profound symbolic meaning, whereas the latter is a very concrete demand on technique. The bamboos in the painting *Bamboo* (Fig.8) appeared to be washed by rain. The bamboos are painted in varying ink tones, creating a sense of foreground and background, and a faint misty veil that



Fig. 8
Bamboo, 1965, Private Collection

suggested early morning light - the very image of the artist's idea of "refreshing feeling of sunshine after the rain." The clear ink tones betrayed not a trace of murkiness, and are adequately applied in painting the leaves, the branches, the knots and the bamboo trunks. The powerful brushwork is effortless and elegant, perfectly in line with the traditional idea of the bamboo as a symbol of the gentleman. *Bamboo* demonstrated Chao's mastery of ink painting as well as his own principles. Relieved of the concern for colours, his ink paintings are given a sense of freedom, which is the reason why he valued ink painting and considered it "the epitome of Chinese painting."⁽³⁶⁾

There is another, apparently quite casual remark by Chao: "Chinese paintings can be very swiftly done, but it has to be true to life."⁽³⁷⁾ The remark revealed Chao as a very dedicated painter, striving all the time to transcend himself. A devoted study of brushwork of course, can eventually lead to the swift completion of a painting. But to be able to render the painted objects "true to life", there needs also a thorough study of nature, a conscious attention to "the floras and faunas, the natural phenomena, so as to grasp life's attributes."⁽³⁸⁾ Such studies must not only involve the outer appearances of the painted objects, but also delve into their individual temperaments in order to be genuinely true to life. There are more to just vigorous drills to improve the technique, and Chao declared: "The artist cannot just stay in his studio and imagine, he has to go out to study with care Nature's attributes before he can even paint."⁽³⁹⁾ A note of wisdom, and the essence of Chinese painting in a nutshell. Chao Shao-an always dispenses his profound wisdom on Chinese painting in the simplest possible language. He listed sixteen rules on Chinese painting, and mentioned "the preservation of the treasured *liu fa* (Six Laws)⁽⁴⁰⁾ as one of the principal items. The Six Laws is one of the major canons in traditional Chinese art.

As an artist, Chao Shao-an took it to heart since he acknowledged the importance of this canon. This was very much due to the encouragement of Gao Qifeng (1889-1933), Chao's teacher. According to Gao: "What are the premises of painting? They are no other than *si ge* (the Four Qualities), the Six Laws and the *liu yao* (the Six Maxims). The Six Laws are spirit, brushwork, likeness, colouring, composition and imitation... Once these essentials are mastered, one is well prepared to paint freely." ⁽⁴¹⁾

The fact that Gao Qifeng advocated these canons is not without base. Gao was one of the three founders of the Lingnan School, who, apart from being an innovator, looked back towards tradition when formulating his theories. His stress on tradition definitely left its mark on Chao. Some of Gao's views are certainly ground-breaking in his times: "We learn from anatomy, study of colours, optics, philosophy, Nature studies, the Six Laws of the ancients and the study of paintings...I went on to study Western life drawing and also geometry, light and dark, perspectives, and made comparisons." ⁽⁴²⁾ It is clear that Gao kept in his mind both traditional and Western arts, but he never elaborated on how these studies can be applied. It seemed that he sanctioned the idea of learning from experience. Yet he asserted: "one should learn humbly from the arts of the world, take whatever is favorable in both traditional and Western art, and achieve a kind of wondrous symbiosis." ⁽⁴³⁾

Gao's idea of combining Chinese and Western art was further developed in Chao. Chao is of the opinion that the Six Laws should remain the core to the art of Chinese painting, and be supplemented by "anatomy, perspective, physics and optics in an enlightened synthesis of both the ancient and the modern, the traditional and the foreign." ⁽⁴⁴⁾ This appeared to be an extension of Gao's beliefs, but on close scrutiny, Chao is obviously less enthusiastic than Gao in the synthesis of Chinese and Western art. He looked upon anatomy and such as only supplements to the Six Laws. Moreover, he did not consider the above disciplines unique to the theories of Western art. ⁽⁴⁵⁾ The fact that he mentioned these disciplines was because in studying them, he could more effectively enforce his dictum that one should "study with care Nature's attributes". It is not so much a synthesis he was thinking of, but using the above mentioned disciplines as references. In this, his views differed significantly from those of his teacher.

Whereas Gao Qifeng did not elaborate upon the commendable aspects of Western art, he drew attention instead to the fine points of Chinese painting: "Based on my own experience, I decided to preserve all the vital mechanisms of Chinese painting, namely brushwork, spirit, ink tone, colouring, metaphorical symbolism, lyricism, philosophical contents and poetry." ⁽⁴⁶⁾ In the simplest term, he expounded upon the essentials of Chinese art. Brushwork, ink tone and colouring are the technical aspects. Spirit is the breath and energy of a work of art. Metaphors, lyricism, philosophy and poetry are considered as means of expression in a painting. It is clear from this perspective that Gao Qifeng did not consider Chinese art inadequate. Quite the contrary, he saw it as rich in "mechanisms" such as spirit. In other words, Gao approached his works from the standpoint of traditional art, in line with what Chao Shao-an was doing later. To Chao, a painting is "to achieve both the essence of the form and the spirit, and infuse it with life, intellect and poetry. Metaphors and allusions, direct or indirect, helped in bringing the work to perfection – '*zhen* (truthfulness), *shan* (goodness) and *mei* (beauty)." ⁽⁴⁷⁾

When contemplating the idea of perfection in art, Gao stressed that the artist should "comprehend the needs of society, then through the wisdom of perfection, render the work of art with *fu* (plain narration), *bi* (analogy) and *xing* (stimulus) so as to influence the contaminated community, enrich the monotonous existence, and elevate the consciousness so as to accomplish a realm that is both lofty and peaceful." ⁽⁴⁸⁾ This again, appeared to be a similar ideal shared by both Gao and Chao, but then, "truthfulness, goodness and beauty" to Gao is a means of expression instilled with "plain narration, analogy and stimulus". Such perfection and metaphor infused works should be a kind of "moral force" that educates the populace. To Chao, "truthfulness, goodness and beauty" is simply the highest goal in art, not necessarily a tool for education. In this too, he differed from Gao.

Since "elevating the consciousness" is not Chao Shao-an's ultimate goal, his idea of "elevation" has more to do with the love of art: "Existence is affected by beauty, which nurtures compassion and consoles the anxious, accentuating the spiritual." ⁽⁴⁹⁾ Despite the differences, Chao still advocates the legacy of Gao: "To further the teachings of my late teacher Mr. Gao Qifeng, I have managed the Lingnan Studio for more than two decades in order to carry on art education." ⁽⁵⁰⁾ Chao is always respectful of Gao, who initiated him on the directions and appreciation of art. Chao kept an open mind, refraining from the clannish tendencies of artists and concentrated on the inheriting and development of his teacher's legacy. He set himself the rule that "take as

reference the teachings of the former masters and refrain from slavish adherence to old ways on the pretext of respect. One's personality should be freely developed." ⁽⁵¹⁾ It is inevitable however, not to study old ways in order to open up new paths. Chao's acknowledgement of the Six Laws is simply his homage to tradition. He saw the achievements of the old masters, be they Chinese or Western, as belonging to their own age and times. He once stated: "Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo and Raphael produced truly magnificent works, but they belonged to a bygone age, and can never be realized again today." ⁽⁵²⁾ Chao stressed on "today" and saw the development of art as "inheriting and creating, exploring what past masters had not explore and fashion a new face for one's own art. The past may be something to be treasured, but I have no intention in doing so." ⁽⁵³⁾

It is apparent that Chao had made concentrated effort in studying the past masters, otherwise he would not come up with the remark that one should "explore what past masters had not explored". This is a simple but telling remark. To explore what past masters had not explored is not synonymous to exploring what past masters had explored. Chao obviously had walked down the grand path of tradition, making meticulous inspections as to how he should leave his marks on this path as a hint to the future and a pointer to the present. He understood fully that he must explore what the past masters had not explored before he could open up to the future. As such, he is keenly conscious of both the "past" and the "present". In spite of his strife to innovate, there is however the imperturbable adherence to legacy. He often described his success in art as "not forsaking the teachings of my teacher, which encouraged me to go on." ⁽⁵⁴⁾

Apart from his teacher, Chao attributed his success to the encouragement of his mother: "My father died early, had it not been my mother working as a domestic servant, I could never go to study. I will never let my mother down." ⁽⁵⁵⁾ The fact that he came from a poor family explained his mother's wish for his success and his subsequent eagerness to show his gratitude. Chao was described by his contemporaries as "an intelligent child who was grateful to his mother who toiled to send him to school. He was therefore determined to succeed, and devoted himself to painting as he grew older." ⁽⁵⁶⁾ Filial love is what drove Chao to achieve, and the path to success was a hard one: "After he married, he became even more devoted to painting to the extent that he often fell ill. Friends persuaded him not to exert himself too much, to which he replied sadly that he knew he was overworked, but as it was human nature to avoid hardship, and coming from a poor family, he owed much to his aging mother for his success that he had to work hard to show his gratitude, and hence the grueling effort". ⁽⁵⁷⁾ Episodes like these revealed Chao as a "humble gentleman" who attributed his own achievement to his mother and his teacher. He went further to list such modesty and filial love as the first provision to be observed as a painter: "It takes a generous mind to accept the world, a narrow mind is destined to achieve little." ⁽⁵⁸⁾

The fact that Chao Shao-an included modesty as an integral element in his views on painting is the result of decades of experience, through which modesty improved his art. This is the source of his success since a humble and liberal mind made him more tolerant of the multitude of artistic influences. Li Jianer, who was active during the early years of the Republic, described Chao's achievements as "true to the essence of beauty and opens himself to intellect and spiritual elements, not limiting himself to one master or one principle." ⁽⁵⁹⁾ The "not limiting to one master or one principle" factor is crucial to the understanding of Chao's art, and is the evidence that Chao is an innovator apart from inheriting from tradition. Failing to appreciate this fact would turn Chao's art into an enigma.

The "true beauty" and the "intellect and spiritual elements" Li Jianer spoke of is best illustrated in the painting *Peacock* (Fig. 9). Chao paints the colourful peacock quite often, and in this instance, he painted the bird at its most graceful and in its full glory. At a



Fig. 9
Peacock, 1954,
Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art



Fig. 10
White peacock, 1969,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

glance, the peacock appeared to be perched serenely on a branch, but in fact, there is motion in the apparently static stance. It seemed that the peacock had just stretched its neck, but immediately drew back and is ready to stretch it again. Its tail feathers, slightly extended, appeared to be ready to open up into a magnificent fan. Chao endowed the noble and elegant bird with an understated drama, which breathed life into the otherwise static painting.

The magnificence of the peacock is very much the result of the artist's means of applying colours. As a bird, the rich colours of the peacock made it a symbol of beauty. Chao Shao-an applied his colours as layers of washes, adding different colours in each individual wash. This is a complicated process but each layer contributes to the brilliance and richness of the colours, culminating in an effective expression of beauty. In *Peacock*, Chao employed also perspective to make the painting more impressive and lifelike. Apart from the use of darker shades for the foreground and lighter shades for the background to bring out the receding effect, Chao also painted the tail feathers larger in the foreground, and distorted the shape to give it the appearance of protruding towards the viewers. The relatively stiff feathers and the tail are fine illustrations of how adequately Chao presents texture. These are contrasted with the soft feathers round the neck. Chao is not only a master in the application of colours, but also an expert in using brushwork to render varying textures. The texture in this work is obviously different

to the painting *Bamboo* mentioned earlier. Indeed, Chao bequeathed his objects with their individual characters, and showed them through brushwork. In his study of brushwork, he adhered to no specific directions. The inventiveness of his brushwork, as with his use of colours, are "applied according to character" as the ancient theories dictated.

As a painting, *Peacock* is also distinctive in terms of composition. The peacock is only partially represented - its tail feathers extended beyond the frame of the painting. This focused the viewer's attention onto the bird itself, and the flowers, which helped to highlight the subject, added grandeur to the painting without distracting from the centre of attention. *Peacock* is true to the form of the bird, and also rich in spirit, which transcended the physical form. The contrast between stillness and movement, and the variation of textures of the feathers bequeathed the painting with a liveliness that gives the painting a spiritual aura which radiates from the painting itself, and draw the viewers back into the painting as the transcendence takes hold. The painting is an apt example of Chao's dictum on "true beauty" and "true spirit" and a demonstration of the four fundamental principles - the choice of materials, composition, brushwork and application of colours - which he listed in the essay "*Lun yi hua zhi cheng* (How a painting is created)".^[60]

Being a colourful bird, it may not be too difficult to depict the peacock's beauty. Chao set himself a challenge by painting a white peacock, whose beauty is beyond words. In *White peacock* (Fig. 10), the artist presented, through the bird's posture and the rendering of the feathers, a gracefulness comparable to his painting of the coloured peacock. There is life in the white peacock's elegance, its beauty and noble temperament expressed in the snow-white tail feathers on the verge of opening up into a fan of splendour. Chao is far-reaching in his depiction of his subjects, and *White peacock* is a supreme showcase of his endeavours to bring out his ideal of beauty and perfection. The work exemplified truth in the accuracy of form, and perfection in the loaded metaphor and the temperament of the bird, whose beauty is rendered with meticulous craftsmanship. Chao used the yellow ginkgo leaves as background to the snow-white bird, heightening the splendid elegance. In many ways, the perfection of the painting is a mirror to Chao's own temperament, and as a painted work, it is highly individualistic.

Chao is also a master in the fashioning of forms and characters of his subject matters. Take for example the figure of the cock in *Rooster* (Fig. 11), which is pregnant with life and personality. The work is known alternatively as "*Herald at the break of dawn*", but the cock in the painting is



Fig. 11
Rooster, 1970, Collection of
The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

not crowing or heralding the coming of dawn. Instead, it looked as if it is deep in meditation. Chao is in fact endowing the cock with human qualities, as is evident in his inscription: "To lead a life cautious with words, but herald the coming day at the break of dawn". The rooster here is a metaphor for a person cautious with his words and behavior, a character whose words carry weight and speaks only at appropriate times. This is not evident when one looks at the painting, but is obvious when one considers the metaphor intended in the inscription and the alternate title. One has to understand Chao through his use of metaphors.

When discussing the subject matter of his paintings, Chao mentioned the importance of content: "To decide upon a subject, one should consider its contents before one begins to paint. When you are equipped with the idea of such contents, it guides your brush to create the images. Whatever the subject matter, be it simply lyrical expressions, or even metaphors, glorification and caricature, it is not unlike what has been prescribed in the ancient dictums of poetry, you can either be direct or indirect, to exalt or to allude. Whether it be landscapes, animals, plant lives or figures, there should always be content and connotations."^[61] Connotation can be understood as metaphors or allusions, and is what gave Chinese literature such depth and content. The same can be said of Chao's works. On a personal level, this can be interpreted as "opening to the phenomena and changes of the universe, and see them in the context of human affairs and human nature."^[62]

In other words, one should make efforts to study Nature in order to comprehend its intricate workings and character. When one attained the state of full understanding of Nature, its forces become ingrained in one's psyche. When expressed through the paintbrush, the artist would then be at one with the universe. This depends on the effort of the will: "There exists a will in the universe, and this will is in touch with the self. To accomplish the fusion of the self and the universe, the pivotal link is the will."^[63] Chao understood this principle when he ponders his subjects, which is the reason why he chose to use metaphor in his paintings. The fusion of the self and the universe is precisely what gives Chao's paintings an indescribable but profound flavour.

In his painting *Red kapok blossoms* (Fig. 12), Chao obviously had an intention to turn the flowers into a symbol of heroism. This is clearly expressed in the poem he wrote as an inscription of the painting:

*The majestic kapok tree stands
Like a legendary hero amidst storm and fog,
Which, at the break of Spring,
Dazzles like the red sun as birds sing.*

Chao's use of metaphor in this painting is demonstrated through his ingenious composition. The tall and sturdy trunk of the kapok tree is partially shown in a vertical frame. Despite its being truncated, the trunk still appeared princely and magnificent, with dazzling flowers in full bloom. The tree is placed in the centre of the frame, with its twisted trunk providing variations. The flowers adorned a branch protruding into the picture from the right, and a dainty bird is placed on the left branch to contrast with the colossal trunk. Kapok



Fig. 12
Red kapok blossoms, 1970, Collection of
The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco



Fig. 13
Moonlight over the pond, 1969, Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

blossoms are themselves sturdy flowers, which Chao rendered as tough and vigorous and painted the pistils with heavy ink. The care taken to present the varying tones and shades and the use of perspective focused the viewer's awareness on the flowers, before leading away to other parts of the picture. A sense of liveliness and poignancy is thus achieved.

Chao Shao-an loves Nature, which explained the vigour and spontaneity in his paintings. In *Moonlight over the pond* (Fig. 13), the sparrows shivering beneath the withered lotus leaves appeared to be in direct contrast to the vibrant flowers in *Red kapok blossoms*. Nevertheless, it is the prevailing gloom of the moonlight painting that highlighted the dynamic life force when set in contrast to the kapok tree. The painting then becomes more intriguing: it is as if the artist turned himself into one of the sparrows, seeking shelter beneath the lotus leaves. He himself became part of the subject, putting himself into the world of the painting and look at the work as part of Nature. In doing so, he led his viewers into this same world, through which they could appreciate the metaphysical realm without hindrance, becoming part of it and oblivious to the existence of the self. This is how Chao's art excels, and set his painting apart as something more than painting, but a domain all to itself.

Chao used poetry in *Red kapok blossoms* to heighten the painting's metaphorical sense. In *Moonlight over the pond*, he used similar tactics by writing a poem that served as the painting's inscription:

Beneath the misty moon the lotus
Weary of the fading summer, sheds
Its verdant splendour, while
Heavy with frosty dew
The night falls silent
But for the sparrows'
Melancholy chatter.

Considering the poetic qualities in Chao Shao-an's paintings, it is a more accurate observation to see his poetry as painterly. The poem above is a painting in itself, and is musical in its rhythm and meters. Chao refrains from allusions and difficult words in his poetry writings - indeed, he intended his poems to be recited and be easily understood. Chao is well versed in poetry. From 1932 on, he studied poetry with Huang Zhuqu (1877-1945). By the time he painted *Moonlight over the pond*, he had already spent thirty-seven years on the study of poetry. The long period of dedication and hard work bore fruit in his refreshing and creative poems, which, when incorporated into his paintings, made them rich artistic experiences. In this painting of the fading lotus, his inscriptions constituted part of the composition. Calligraphy therefore, becomes a significant part of his art. More importantly, he is adept in the brushwork of both paintings and calligraphy. Chao likes to use hard bristle brushes. He would begin the stroke with a slanted tip and then raise his wrist to proceed with vertical tip, combining the characteristics of both maneuvers. This results in an agile and smooth style. Applied to his inscriptions, the elegant lines of his poems becomes the concerted expression of poetry, calligraphy and painting, a cherished ideal in Chinese painting, and in Chao's case executed in a harmonious unity of content and style.

To conjure up the atmosphere of a lotus pond under cold, misty moonlight, Chao applied layers

of washes. But in *Sunflower* (Fig. 14), the same technique is used to achieve a very different effect. This is also a large painting of flowers and birds, but the sunflower, the subject of the painting, is described as "standing aloof against the frosty autumn breeze". The sunflower is hardy, quite unlike the delicate gladiolus, and exquisite touches will not be in character. Chao therefore chose to paint the flowers with powerful strokes. Compared to the two paintings mentioned above, the composition of *Sunflower* seemed more casual and less contrived. The main subjects are painted in the intriguing "one stroke" manner, the effects of which are demonstrated to the full. The lively skipping touches attested to the mastery of Chao's dexterity in the maneuvering of the wrist. The ink tones on the other hand, are free and fluent, creating the impression of the flowers swaying in the breeze and birds ready to take flight from the stalks. The sense of motion in the painting is the result of swift brushstrokes and the spontaneous composition. Chao is at one with Nature when he paints this picture. The sunflowers sprouted from his improvising, and not from the twists of his wrist which directed the strokes. It is as the ancient masters observed: "The painting is inspired by the ink, the ink by the brush, the brush by

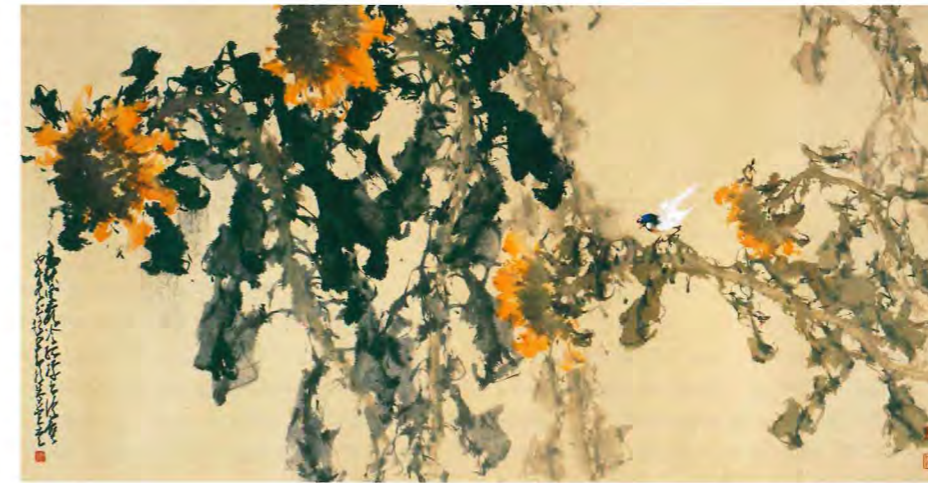


Fig. 14
Sunflower, 1966, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art

the wrist, and the wrist by the mind, not unlike the creations of Nature."⁽⁶⁴⁾ The rich and casual manner in which Chao employed his ink and colours is evident not only in large paintings but also in album leaves as well. The robust brushwork of *Sunflower*, when compared to paintings like *Poppy* (Fig. 15), becomes elaborate and cumbersome. Apart from the pistil and the stamens, the petals were painted in just three strokes. The subtle variations of colours and tones of the "one stroke" technique are masterfully illustrated here. Unlike the flowers in *Gladioli*, the brushwork in *Poppy* is even more minimal, but Chao's robust strokes did not take away the dainty, exquisite quality of the poppy. Chao aimed to bringing out life and form in their full spirit with as little strokes as possible, and achieved his aims in *Poppy*. The leaves, painted with inclined tip of the brush, trailed and compressed in the "one stroke" manner, exuded a strong sense of life and energy. The quivering wasp too, is a lively touch, which makes the painting even more inspiring. *Poppy* indeed, exemplified Chao's dictum on brushwork: "Supple brushwork expresses the life in objects, whereas the diversity of ink tones brings out the spirit of things."⁽⁶⁵⁾

Compared to large works such as *Sunflower*, album leaves such as *Poppy* appeared to be much less demanding. In actuality, the case is just the opposite. Brushwork is more demanding when tackling small paintings - it has to be much more immaculate in order to arrest the viewer's attention. In smaller paintings too, the artist derived more pleasure from his impromptu splashes since it takes much less time to complete. As such, the artist can finish his work in a few brief strokes, which often turned out to be more inspired as they are created instantaneously at the spur of the moment. Works such as these can be quite extraordinary since they are created out of spontaneity, not contrivance. To the old masters, this is what came to be known as "Heaven's Wonder".⁽⁶⁶⁾



Fig. 15
Poppy, 1967, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art



Fig. 16
Easter lily, 1966, Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

the bud, creating a kind of attention seeking tension. The leaves are strategically placed to allow the viewer's glance to roam among the flower, insects and the leaves in an endless excursion. It is a microcosm comprised of superior technique and infinite delight, and can only be described as a heavenly wonder.

Chao often adorn his flower paintings with insect lives, which are presented in his own unique style. The praying mantis in *Easter lily* for example, clings upside down on a petal in a most appealing manner. Chao often paints his insects in three steps. The first step is the head, the body and the wings, which he executes in one stroke. Then with another stroke, he paints the abdomen, completing the insect with another stroke that described the legs. The marvel of his "one stroke" technique furnished the insects with rich shades and hues, another heavenly wonder in action.

In Chao Shao-an's paintings, a central role is also given to insect lives quite often. Insects are by nature, diminutive creatures. To give them a leading role requires superlative skill and an inventive sense of composition. In the album leaf *Katydid and rice stalks* (Fig. 17), the katydid takes on the central role. Chao paints the rice stalks with light ink, and the rice grains rendered in both light and dark ink. The varying ink tones of the dynamically realized rice stalks, rendered with an energetic application of vertical tip, are elastic and animated. Despite their looking slim and frail, they nevertheless commanded the viewer's attention, since the artist had infused his brushwork with his own robust energy. The katydid is placed in the upper right hand corner, hanging onto the rice grains, droning in sadness, or perhaps simply resting. The contrast between the calm and motion made this a picture of life. Interestingly enough, it is the rice stalk that is in motion, while the katydid remained static, switching roles in the painting's attempt to introduce a sense of movement. But the katydid, with its whiskers wriggling as if ready to take flight, is itself an element of pulsating life.

Chao Shao-an has succeeded in creating a harmonious realm in this painting in which man and Nature are at one with each other. With Nature in his heart and mind, the force of Nature is mastered in his hands, which gave him the ability to "turn the world".^[67]



Fig. 17
Katydid and rice stalks, 1959,
Collection of The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

The painting *Easter lily* (Fig. 16) should be considered as one such heavenly wonders. It was swiftly and spontaneously painted, but with such logic and order. The flower is done in double outlines, painted with gliding strokes as if out of the subconscious. It points towards the opposite direction from the flower bud, in a composition that draws attention to both the flower and

In both *Katydid and rice stalks* and *Easter lily*, Chao painted his insects with the "one stroke" technique. But this is not the only means through which Chao paints his insects. In *Cicada and bamboo* (Fig. 18), he resorted to another tactic. The glistening black husk of the cicada, coupled with its light, transparent wings and the soft, rounded abdomen, are very difficult to realize on untreated rice paper. Not only must the artist deal with the differing textures and appearances of these various part of the cicada's anatomy, he has to present the cicada in its accurate form and give it life and spirit. Chao here demonstrated his "genuine expertise", which he defined as "the only pathway to fame. In painting, it means something that only you yourself can do which others cannot."^[68]

Like *Katydid and rice stalks*, *Cicada and bamboo* is a contrast between the static and the mobile. The bamboo is the static element whereas the cicada is the mobile. In this work, Chao again inscribed it with his own poem:

*The bamboo,
A symbol of lofty virtue.
The Cicada,
A reminder of serenity amidst calamity.
The high wind carries far
The soothing drone of the cicada,
While in rain and heavy dew
The bamboo steadfastly stands.*

The bamboo is a traditional symbol for lofty ideals and resolution. To Chao Shao-an, the cicada too, is a symbol for the virtuous, and to an extent, an expression of his own moral ideals. In general, symbols such as bamboo are indirect metaphors, assigning certain virtuous qualities in a person to the characteristics of the plant. Such comparisons are means through which additional interest is invested into the painted object, exemplifying at the same time the artist's moral views.^[69] Chao Shao-an's cicada therefore, is more than just a metaphor and serves as a symbolic alter ego, introducing his own thoughts into his works. Scholars in ancient times expressed their moral views through poetry, and Chao expressed his through paintings. He once stressed that it is essential for paintings to envelope "literary thoughts and poetry", an attempt which adds meaning to the "realm of perfection" as exemplified in his works.

Chao had been using the cicada as his symbolic alter ego quite early on in his career. His contemporaries once remarked: "He loved to paint cicadas, and had gathered his more satisfactory works in a collection entitled *The Radiant Cicada*, as an ode to this symbol of lofty virtue."^[70]

The collection was completed in 1936, comprising entirely of paintings of cicada. The words "radiant" and "cicada" bear the connotation of continuity in Chinese, and "radiant", pronounced "yan", has the additional meanings of beauty and smile.^[71] This collection serves as a testimony that, despite his explorations of other forms, the album remained the one that Chao favoured. In albums, Chao perfected his simple and concise style which "stimulates in every brushstroke" and is "vigorous in both idea and technique", an ultimate and vivacious expression of "true painting".^[72]

Chao's love for the album led to his publication of the collection *Chao Shao-an Sketches* in 1984. A total of a hundred and sixty paintings were included in this collection, which, unlike *The Radiant Cicada*, included subject matters other than cicadas. These small paintings are not miniatures of large paintings, and are varied in style and content, becoming an imaginative and complex universe all on their own.

The dexterity of Chao Shao-an in painting birds had been discussed earlier in relation to large paintings such as *Red kapok blossoms*, *Moonlight over the pond* and *Sunflower*. The birds Chao painted differed significantly when they are painted as adornments in large paintings and when they take on a more prominent role in albums. The solitary paradise flycatcher in



Fig. 18
Cicada and bamboo, 1985,
Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

Autumn splendour (Fig. 19) is no alien intruder but a bird born in the consciousness of the artist. It is a bird created entirely by the artist, coming from the realm of true painting prevailing in the artist's ego - a realm that is thoroughly imaginary. But it is a tangible and realistic realm to the artist as it is the result of his lifelong studies and explorations. The dainty flycatcher in *Autumn splendour* perches on a branch, ready to take flight. Chao conveyed this customary posture of birds with a dynamism that arises from both the artist's observation as well as his own personality. The bird is supported in the composition by light ink brushstrokes representing branches. These sparse branches, like the rice stalks in *Katydid and rice stalks*, are executed as understated strokes, but is much more difficult to present since the knotted branches are not straight and smooth like the rice stalks. When they are to be executed in the "one stroke" technique, there are more twists and turns. Yet they merged seamlessly into the picture, and Chao inscribed the painting with nothing more than his signature, which integrated flawlessly with the painting.



Fig. 19
Autumn splendour, 1959, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art

Unlike the flycatcher in *Autumn splendour*, which remained perched on its branch, the swallows in *Pair of swallows* (Fig. 20) are in flight. Except for the tinges of cinnabar yellow on the birds' chests and the touches of indigo on the birds' heads, the painting is done entirely with ink. Swallows are one of Chao's earliest subjects. The bird is an ideal subject with which the master conducts his study of ink, but it would be futile to approach his art from his perspective. As the old masters put it: "the skill in brushwork does not preclude the use of ink. If one were to approach the two as separate subjects, one would miss the point entirely."^[73] In this painting of two swallows, the appeal of the ink is expressed through the brush.



Fig. 20
Pair of swallows, 1968, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art

Without Chao's mastery of brushwork, the ink will just be a patch of black stain, dull and lifeless. In this small painting, Chao effortlessly realized the lively swallows with guileless and inspired handling. He valued brushwork and considered it "the highest pinnacle of Chinese painting". *Pair of swallows* is a testament to this ideal.

Chao's paintings of Nature included subjects other than birds and beasts or plants and insects. He once observed: "Nature is such

a marvel which provides endless subjects. Take for example the changes in the weather, the passage from dawn to dusk, and the comings and goings of the seasons. One might also include the fish in the water, the birds in flight, the changing moods of man, and the spectacles of the mountains and the waters. There are subjects everywhere."^[74]

Chao however, did not expand on how a painting is realized once the subject matter is decided upon. His observation may in a way explained further by the remarks of some modern critics: "To be tutored by the clues nature provided, the work must be robust and filled with spirit, and come alive on paper."^[75] This should be a strictly observed maxim so as to be true to Nature. Chao did not make his statement in the same wordings, but through embodying both form and spirit, and made his subjects come alive on paper with his adept brushwork.

His landscape paintings are excellent demonstrations of this marvelous feat, in which he allowed himself to become mesmerized by the changes in "the passage from dawn to dusk" in a manner he described as, "observing and comprehending Nature, to be nourished by the wonders of creation."^[76] The spectacle of mountains and rivers, the mystery of changes in the weather and the seasons, can all be deeply moving experiences. It is a matter of course that one must be totally overwhelmed by such experiences and feel profoundly what these experiences are in order to paint the landscapes. *The returning boats* (Fig. 21), was obviously inspired by Chao's sojourns in southwestern China. This is not a large-scale work, but is awe inspiring in its monumental disposition. The peaks in the foreground confronts the viewer with imposing momentum, extending beyond the upper and lower frames of the painting, leaving a very small area for the distant banks and mountains. These, and the magnificent mountains in the foreground, are enveloped in mist, with the returning boats moored by the shore. The mist appeared to be drifting, bringing together the yin and the yang, heaven and earth in one vaporous vastness. Such overpowering vista conveyed in a small painting, pulsating with life, is truly a work by a master familiar with the subtleties of Nature. This is indeed an apt exemplification that, "to be able to fully comprehend nature, then the painting became truly creative. To be perfect in one's painting, one has to embody in oneself the spirit of Nature."^[77] In other words, once the artist



Fig. 21
The returning boats, Not dated, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art



Fig. 22
Returning crows, Not dated, Collection of Guangzhou Museum of Art

managed to paint the wonders of Nature in its true spirit, he becomes "truly creative". The wonders of Nature on the other hand, are potent with painterly possibilities, which can only be realized once the artist understands the subtleties of these wonders. In *The returning boats*, Chao Shao-an painted the magnificence of the Three Gorges of Yangtze, but his brushworks remained simple.

Chao Shao-an is keenly interested in landscapes, a passion just as ardent as his interest in plants and bird lives. He made concentrated

deliberations on the nuances of the changes in the landscape. He loved particularly the enchanting hours before dusk. In his study of the misty Three Gorges, he played to the full the light effects of such fleeting hours. In *Returning crows* (Fig. 22), he depicted both the falling light and the setting sun. Filtered through the rising mist, the glow of the setting sun gave the landscape an otherworldly atmosphere. The composition conveyed a sense of depth, allowing the viewers to extend his gaze from the near shore to the distant banks, so spacious and nebulous, yet far-reaching and remote. But this small painting does not fail to impress one as majestic, with simple brushwork that made the painting so full of life.

In the even more subtlety rendered *Sunset at Leifeng Pagoda* (Fig. 23), the evening light is given a more exquisite description. The dilapidated Leifeng Pagoda becomes a setting for the play of the setting sun. The evening light, falling on the pagoda, become reflected and refracted. It might be that the artist decided to use the pagoda as an object for the study of light, which falls on its multi-faceted surface, and gives rise to effects quite different from the mountainous and river settings he explored. It is not just the light Chao was interested in; he was obviously intrigued by the evening sun, which occupied an important place in his output. This is not considered just in terms of quantity, but in technical inventiveness as well.

Chao invested *Sunset at Leifeng Pagoda* with a strong sense of melancholy. The scenery in the



Fig. 23
Sunset at Leifeng Pagoda, 1955, Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

setting sun invokes much of this. Chao placed his pagoda on a grassy ground, surrounded by autumnal trees devoid of much of their leaves. The absence of dwellings brought about an air of desolation, which added to the sadness. Leifeng Pagoda in the setting sun used to be one of the ten celebrated scenic spots of the West Lake in Hangzhou. The melancholy is therefore out of place in a certain sense. But this is the response of artist to the scene, presented as a reflection of his feelings. This is purely a matter of choice. The artist must choose what to retain and what to discard: "The natural landscape is a reflection of the artist's sentiments. The reality of the landscape is the reality of the heart. What lies embedded in the heart would find expression as a reflection of the outside world. The response of the heart is the expression of the scene." ⁽⁷⁸⁾ The critic emphasized the "heart", the heart of the self, the artist. As such, the response to natural scenery varies from person to person. But it is the heart, the heart of the self that is vital. The desolation of *Sunset at Leifeng Pagoda* comes from the "heart" of Chao's "self".

The place of the self in art has been much discussed: "In dealing with social matters, the self has to be subdued. But in artistic creation, the self should occupy a place of prominence. What is self but individuality, which depends on the talent and ability. What is ability but knowledge and vision, surpassing the former practitioners and excel in one's unique inventiveness. Such should an artist talent be." ⁽⁷⁹⁾

In Chinese art, it is of vital importance that the "self" exists. To be able to express the self, inventiveness is of course important, but there are criteria as to what the self should be - to "surpass the former practitioners". This is a belief Chao shared - to surpass and excel those who preceded one. The dictum had been repeatedly emphasized for more than a century, but is an apt description of Chao's works.

For all the surpassing and excelling, the question of inheritance should not be neglected. There is tradition, but the new - that is, the present - must also be considered before one can talk about legacy and inheritance. It is a matter of "new derived from old, with elements of the old still existing in the new, so that the legacy carried on." ⁽⁸⁰⁾ If there is no continuity, and the old and the new become entirely severed from each other, there is no legacy and the mission of development can never be fulfilled since: "Life is the metamorphosis from the past to the present, and this metamorphosis is what constituted an entity." ⁽⁸¹⁾

In his art, Chao is firmly based in the "present" but his relations with tradition is evident in his philosophy on art, which he often expressed in his conversations. He was a follower of traditional ideas and age-old disciplines, from which he developed a new artistic philosophy that belonged to "the present". His profound understanding of tradition enabled him to synthesize both the old and the new into a harmonious whole. He was an inheritor, but also an explorer, who successfully forged his own new style. The special meaning he attached to the "present" led to the establishment of the *jin she* (Today Society): "Returning to Guangdong after the war, the old master still came to visit us, leaning on his walking stick, and established the Today Society together with Messieurs Gao Jianfu, Yang Shanshen, Guan Shanyue and Li Gemin. Before the society was officially established, the old master died on account of his stomach ailment." ⁽⁸²⁾ The old master was Chen Shuren (1883-1948). The fact that this artist society comprising of painters of the Lingnan School did not call itself Lingnan but Today Society bears some significant connotations. The decision to name the society "today" came possibly from Chao Shao-an. "Today" implied greater urgency, and is more direct. It certainly has more sense of an era, and is impregnated with a multitude of allusions that indicated a search for directions. The changing times stemmed the development of the Today Society, but Chao Shao-an's pupils established the *jin hua hui* (Today's Art Association) in 1961. Chao had this to say about the birth of this art association: "I have been traveling during the past ten years, and had come to the realization that in the world all over, art has entered a new sphere, and one should not stick to old rules. My pupils from the Lingnan Studio decided to establish the Today's Art Association after I returned from my travels. This is a studio in which they partake in life drawing and creative activities that helped to express the individual talents. The association exhibits once every year as a means of encouraging each other to be inventive and keep in pace with the change of times." ⁽⁸⁴⁾

Chao was in actuality the founder of this association. It was obviously his attempt to urge his students to strive for higher achievements by bringing them together in an institution, with "the present" as the common goal. Chao baptized the association's publication "Today's Art". He was, however, somewhat ambiguous when he explained the meaning of the publication's name: "I called it 'Today's Art' with heart felt intentions, those who are knowledgeable would understand." ⁽⁸⁵⁾ He was intentionally ambiguous since he assumed that his perseverance and the

kind of reformist ideals he held would be understood by all those who were well informed in the development of Chinese art. But if there are those who are knowledgeable, it follows that there will also be those who are ignorant. Chao was keenly aware that his reformist ideas would encounter criticisms and hostilities from "the ignorant", but he was content as long as the "knowledgeable" were sympathetic. He was resigned to let his students to carry on the explorations: "I am getting old, and lacked the stamina to carry on and develop the legacy. I leave it to my followers." ⁽⁸⁶⁾

But he was not totally retired from the perpetuation of his ideals. The Today's Art Association however, disbanded after about thirteen years of activity. Chao never organize another student art association after this. But the concept of "the present", be it in the form of Today Society or Today's Art Association, remained constant. His preference of "today" instead of Lingnan, speaks volumes.

As Chinese art developed, there emerged various different schools. But when a critic discusses the achievements of an individual artist, he is looking at the actual achievements of the artist, not the school the artist belonged to. A school is an indicator of the times; to consider an artist in context of a school is to see in him the significance of a certain phase in art history. But in order to perceive an artist's ideas and contributions, it is necessary to take him out of the context of schools. The self is an important element in artistic achievements. Each individual within a school has his "self", his particular style, which cannot be considered as one single unanimous concept and see it as a collective achievement of a certain school. Chao Shao-an clearly did not consider the development of the Lingnan School his mission. He merely inherited from Gao Qifeng, opening up "the present" as a reinterpretation of the old. To him, the Lingnan School served only as an origin ⁽⁸⁷⁾, not a set of rules to be followed. The art of this spirited master is not limited within the confines of the Lingnan School. What he strived to develop is the treasured brushwork that is crucial to Chinese art. His own brushwork had since become a timeless miracle, representing "the present" but closely connected with the "self" as perceived in tradition.

Writer's note: I studied with late Chao Shao-an since 1979. To facilitate discussion and ensure fairness, I did not address Professor Chao Shao-an as my master in this commentary. I am always respectful towards Mr. Chao.

Notes:

- (1) "Guohua youjue (The Essentials of Chinese Painting)", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1957, Vol. 2, Issue 8), Hong Kong.
- (2) *Ibid.*
- (3) Li Jianer, "Zhao Shaoang", in *Guangdong xiandai hua ren zhuan (Modern Guangdong Painters)*, 1941, p.79.
- (4) Chao Shao-an, "Hua hu de cixu (Steps in Painting a Tiger)", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1959, Vol. 7, Issue 37), Hong Kong.
- (5) Zheng Ji, "Meng you ju huaxue jianming (On Ideas from The Meng You Studio's Concise Guide to Painting)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.555.
- (6) Qian Mu, *Cong zhongguo lishi lai kan zhongguo minzuxing ji zhongguo wenhua (The Chinese National Character and Chinese Culture from the Perspectives of Chinese History)* (Taipei: Lian Jing Publication Company, 1994), p.3.
- (7) Lin Shu, "Chun jue zhai lunhua (The Chun Jue Studio Discourses on Painting)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.628.
- (8) - (14) As (4).
- (15) "Zhao Shaoang you mei guilai (Chao Shao-an Returns from America)", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1961, Vol. 9, Issue 63), Hong Kong.
- (16) - (18) *Ibid.*
- (19) Zhang Yanyuan, "Lun hua lui fa (On The Six Laws)", in *Lidai minghua ji (Famous Paintings of the Dynasties)* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1983), p.13.
- (20) *Ibid.* A quotation from Zhang Yanyuan: "To realize the spirit in a painting, the likeness in form will also be realized."
- (21) As (15).
- (22) Song Nian, "Yi yuan lun hua (The Yi Yuan Discourses on Paintings)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.623.
- (23) *Ibid.*
- (24) *Ibid.*, p.622.
- (25) As (15).
- (26) - (40) As (1).
- (41) Gao Qifeng, "Meigan yu jiaohua (Aesthetic and Enlightenment Theory)", in Huang Xiaogeng & Wu Jin, *Guangdong xiandai huatan shilu (Modern Guangdong Paintings)* (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1990), p.109.
- (42) Gao Qifeng, "Huaxue bushi yijian siwu (Painting is not a lifeless subject)", in Huang Xiaogeng & Wu Jin, *Guangdong xiandai huatan shilu (Modern Guangdong Paintings)* (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1990), pp.111 - 112.
- (43) *Ibid.*, p.112.
- (44) As (1).
- (45) Chao Shao-an once declared: "Western painters are not the only ones who sees light, which is to say, when studying the effect of light on objects, both Chinese and Western painters shared the same experiences."
- (46) As (42).
- (47) As (1).
- (48) As (42), p.111.
- (49) As (1).
- (50) - (51) *Ibid.*
- (52) As (15).
- (53) As (1).
- (54) Chao Shao-an, "A Study of Chinese Paintings – Chapter 1", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1965, Vol. 1, Issue 103), Hong Kong.
- (55) As (1).
- (56) As (3), p.78.
- (57) *Ibid.*, pp.78 - 79.
- (58) As (1).
- (59) As (3), p.78.
- (60) Chao Shao-an, "Lun yi hua zhi cheng (How a painting is created)", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1965, Vol. 4, Issue 106), Hong Kong.
- (61) *Ibid.*
- (62) Qian Mu, *Shuang xi du yu (Shuang Xi Monologues)* (Taipei: Student Book Store, 1985), p.140.
- (63) *Ibid.*, p.322.
- (64) Shi Tao, "Kugua huoshang huayu lu (The Bitter Melon Monk On Painting - Opus of Special Studies No. 4)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.148.
- (65) Chao Shao-an, "Yun bi (Brushwork), A Study of Chinese Paintings – Chapter 5", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1965, Vol. 5, Issue 107), Hong Kong.
- (66) Shen Zongqian, Jie zhou xuehua bian (Jie Zhou's Manual on Painting - Vol. 1 On Spirit), in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.341.
- (67) Quotation from Shi Tao, meaning that the talent of the artist has to be unhindered by forces of Nature and the rules set by man, and that painting is a matter of the heart. See "Kugua huoshang huayu lu (The Bitter Melon Monk On Painting - Opus of Enlightenment No. 2)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.147.
- (68) As (22), p.617.
- (69) As (62), p.146.
- (70) As (3).
- (71) "Radiant Cicada" is a term coined by Chao Shao-an's poetry teacher Huang Zhuju. This writer had consulted Huang Zhuju's descendant Huang Yaoran on its meaning.
- (72) Zhou Yigui, "Xiao shan hua pu (The Xiao Shan Manual on Painting, The Two Words Formula - Vol. 2)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.792.
- (73) As (66), p.499.
- (74) As (1).
- (75) Jin Shaocheng, "Huaxue jiangyi (Lectures on Painting - Vol. 2)", in *Hualun congkan (The Art Criticism Series)* (1977, Vol. 8), Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, p.731.
- (76) As (1).
- (77) As (75).
- (78) *Ibid.*, p.738.
- (79) As (22), p.602.
- (80) Qian Mu, "Zhongguoren de sixiang zonggang (The Quintessence of the Chinese Mind - No. 2)", in *Cong zhongguo lishi lai kan zhongguo minzuxing ji zhongguo wenhua (The Chinese National Character and Chinese Culture from the Perspectives of Chinese History)* (Taipei: Lian Jing Publication Company, 1994), p.77.
- (81) As above, "The Quintessence of the Chinese Mind - No.7", p.90.
- (82) Chao Shao-an, "Yuanyuan – Lingnan san jia (Origins - Three Masters of Lingnan, A Study of Chinese Paintings – Chapter 2)", in *Dengta yuekan (The Lighthouse Magazine)* (1965, Vol. 2, Issue 104), Hong Kong.
- (83) Clue to the naming of the society as Today Society as suggested by Chao: Chao mentioned the societies name and establishment when he talked about Chen Shuren. Chao later named his student art association as the Today's Art Association, evidently out of his insistence on "today" or "the present".
- (84) See Chao's preface for the second issue of Today's Art in 1963.
- (85) See Chao's preface for the first issue of Today's Art in 1960. The publication of this first issue preceded the establishment of the association by one year.
- (86) As (54).
- (87) As (82). When Chao Shao-an began writing "A Study of Chinese Paintings", he wrote about himself, which was followed by "Origins - Three Masters of Lingnan".