

Curatorial Interpretation

Since its opening in 2000, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum has always embraced one of its key missions: to collect, exhibit and promote Hong Kong photography. In 2001, the Museum organised the centennial exhibition “Vision Beyond — Hong Kong Art Photography 1900-2000” to provide a comprehensive reference of great works by local artists and to salute more than 400 art photographers who have made the photographic history over the last century. In 2007, the Museum presented the “Cameras Inside-out” exhibition that illustrated the technological developments of cameras and its interaction with photographers of the last century.

With a view to further broadening our audience’s vision on Hong Kong photography, and to systematically collecting and exhibiting a variety of photographic works, the Museum is launching the “Hong Kong Photo Series” from 2009. Special thematic exhibitions will be organised to showcase works of iconic local photographers with a view to dealing both with the history of photography and future trends. The first in the series is “The Verve of Light and Shadow: Master Photographers Tchan Fou-li · Kan Hing-fook · Leo K. K. Wong”. This exhibition provides an overview of the budding stages of photography in Hong Kong while featuring three senior photographers who are still very much devoted to the local photographic scene.

China — *Mo Jing’s Eight Principles of Optics*

Photography is based on principles of optics. Put simply, an image is captured on photographic film by exposing a photosensitive medium to the light reflected by objects. In Ancient China, there was recognition of such optical properties some 2,000 years ago. In the *Mo Jing*¹, a Mohist classic dating back to the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), *Mo Jing’s Eight Principles of Optics* lays the foundation for an elaborate optical theory. The principles briefly explain the rationale behind shadow, reflection and pinhole techniques. Demonstrating that scientific knowledge of the physical world was already well aware in ancient China, it is clear people had noted and grasped a variety of optical concepts such as the straight-line propagation of light, the formation of shadows and its variation patterns, the effect of an inverted image forming through a pinhole, and the concept of proportion between object distance and image size. Technology that was able to capture images on film, however, emerged only in the early 19th century in the west.

In 1839, the French artist Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre(1787–1851) announced the invention of the daguerreotype at the French Academy of Sciences thus firmly locating the discovery of photography in Europe. That same year, the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot(1800-1877) invented the talbotype or calotype which involves a negative-positive process. Both claimed to have invented photography in 1839. Since then, photography diversified progressively as technological research advanced in the western world. The development of photographic technology,

¹ Part of the body of work known as the *Mo Zi*, the *Mo Jing* is an anthology of Mohist works written during the Warring States Period. The *Mo Jing* contains a wealth of knowledge on physics. Although his exact dates of birth and death remain uncertain, the scholar Mo Zi is attributed to have been active between 479 and 381 B.C.

equipment and methods for film processing emerged rapidly. Looking back, it is truly amazing to note that photography, which has become part of our daily lives, was invented less than 200 years ago. Nowadays, a person can take a photograph at any time and nearly anywhere with the built-in camera of the mobile phone.

Photography was introduced to China soon after its invention in Europe. It found its way to the country in the 19th and 20th centuries when Europe expanded her influence over the rest of the world with ambitious economic, trade, diplomatic and missionary exchanges. In the early days, however, photography was used mainly for functional purposes of recording. For example, westerners visiting China photographed its local customs and landscapes, as well as news documentation. In the mid 19th century, westerners began to run photographic studios in trade ports like Guangzhou and Shanghai that provided a novel and advanced portraiture service that differed from conventional portrait painting. Taking a photographic portrait required less time and its results were realistic. Additionally, photo portraits were priced competitively lower than traditional portraiture. The trend soon caught on. Seizing the opportunities offered by this emerging industry, many Chinese painters who ran studios learned the necessary skills and gradually transformed their painter studios into photographic ones. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that when photography was first introduced to China, its practice was to a large degree confined in the southern coastal regions where contact with westerners was much more frequent. One such place was the British colony of Hong Kong. This humble island territory would end up playing a pivotal role in taking the lead and opening up the future of photography in the 20th century. Indeed, Hong Kong made crucial contributions to taking photography from a budding interest to an art form in China. In this way, Hong Kong secured its place in the international photography scene.

Hong Kong — Salon Kingdom

Hong Kong, a territory of humble size, has made distinguished achievements in the study of photographic art over a short period of just over two decades. In particular, Hong Kong's success over the last 15 years has been admirable thus earning it the name of "Salon Kingdom" . . .

Chew K. C., *Fifteen Years of Photography in Hong Kong, Sing Tao Man Pao (Hong Kong)*, 1969.²

From documentary photography to elevated forms of art photography, this impressive development owed its success to the unstinting efforts made by early photographic societies and the social elite. One example is the founding of the Photographic Society in London in 1853 (Now known as the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain). It has the distinction of being the first well-established photographic society in the world. At the outset, it counted amongst its members the prominent figures in the society whereas the British monarch were its patrons. Also, designations awarded by this society were highly prestigious. In 1892, the photographic society Linked Ring

² This article first appeared in *Photography in Hong Kong, 1954-1969* published by the *Sing Tao Man Pao (Hong Kong)* in 1969. Hong Kong photographer Chew K. C. was active from the early 1950s to the late 1970s.

Brotherhood in London began to host annual salons. At that time, the fashionable term “salon” referred to exhibitions of outstanding art hosted by the high society in French art circles. In 1910, the London Salon was founded and set a criterion that only works with a distinctive artistic quality would be accepted for exhibition. Thereafter, photographic salons were organised frequently around the world.

From the late 19th century to mid 20th century, Mainland China was caught in extended political turmoil. By contrast, Hong Kong was a cosmopolitan hub. The earliest photographic amateurs in Hong Kong were mostly expatriates from the west, while ethnic Chinese photographers were predominantly intellectuals and professionals. Against this unique backdrop, Chinese art photography thrived in Hong Kong. In 1937, the Photographic Society of Hong Kong—the city’s first photographic society—came into being. At that time, the membership consisted of both westerners and Chinese, westerners comprising the majority. Many former Governors of Hong Kong were patrons of the society that began hosting the Hong Kong International Salon in 1946. Art photography in Hong Kong, therefore, emerged preliminary within a western sphere of influence as many close exchanges with the world of western photographic art were maintained by the city.

In 1952, the Photographic Society of America set up a special department to compile results from all international salon competitions around the world. When the results of the first pictorial print division (monochrome) were published, the list included Hong Kong photographers Kan Hing-fook, Francis Wu, Zhang Ruzhao, Lai Yifeng, Wu Qihou, Che Keqi and Tan Guoyun. In 1958, the first pictorial print division (colour) results were released and Tchan Fou-li, Zhang Shufa, Xu Shen and Wu Qihou were listed. Indeed, entries from Hong Kong photographers have been successful in many international salons hosted by different nations and regions over the years making this group’s achievements truly impressive. Hong Kong photographers have won many high level awards in various international photographic societies. Hundreds of photographers have been conferred the distinctions of Associateship (ARPS) and Fellowship (FRPS) by the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. The sum of all their accomplishments would be too numerous to mention here. Based on this outstanding output, Hong Kong enjoyed being known as the “Salon Kingdom”. “The Verve of Light and Shadow” exhibition showcases the works of three master photographers: Tchan Fou-li, Kan Hing-fook and Leo K.K. Wong. The exhibition offers exemplary justification for Hong Kong’s great reputation and provides viewers the opportunity to get to know the individual styles and creative pursuits of these three respectable senior artists.

Tchan Fou-li — A Composite-style of Photography and Painting

Tchan Fou-li (1916-) studied photography under the famous Vietnamese-Chinese photographer Chen Fangqu³ in the 1940s. Tchan settled in Hong Kong in 1955 and has since been engaging in creative photography for more than half a century. His early participation in international salons was met with great success. For five

³ Chen Fangqu is a Vietnamese-Chinese who graduated from Beijing University. Settling in Vietnam before the Sino-Japanese War, he set up and ran the Chen Fangqu Studio where he earned a living with portrait photography while engaging in amateur photography during his leisure time. He is a few years older than Tchan Fou-li.

consecutive years, outstanding works exhibited at international salons placed him among the Top Ten⁴ photographers in the world. He also founded the Chinese Photographic Association of Hong Kong with fellow photographers in 1958. Unlike the already existent the Photographic Society of Hong Kong, this association was the first to be formed by Chinese photographers. In 1995, the Society of Worldwide Ethnic Chinese Photographers was formed. Tchan was elected as its Honorary President. Tchan also founded the iconic photography magazines *Photoart*, *Photo Pictorial* and *China Tourism*.

An expert in capturing the interaction among nature, life and man, Tchan counts *War and Peace* (Fig. 1), *Survival* (Fig. 2) and *Surge of the Sea* (Fig. 3) as amongst his representative works from the 1950s and 1960s. Tchan has travelled round most of the world and, amongst all he has seen, the scenery and landscapes of China have touched him the most. Since the 1950s, he has been committed to raising pictorial photography to poetic levels. His goal has always been to place the artist's subjective perception first, much like the ancient literati. In 1962, he wrote the essay "Chinese pictorial painting and landscape photography" where he advocated "it was vital to honour the heritage of Chinese painting when shooting landscape photographs." This earned him the appellation of "Wang Wei of the photographic world". His works *The Glowing Pines* (Fig. 4), *Winter Habitat* (Fig. 5) and *Autumn Leaves* (Fig. 6) are striking examples of this style. Along with the development of his Chinese pictorial style, he promoted a "Composite-style of photography and painting" and invited many famous Chinese painters to collaborate with him. For example, Wu Guanzhong (1919-) and Huang Yongyu (1924-) embellished the photos *Shadow* (Fig. 7) and *First Sign of Autumn* (Fig. 8) with their respective brush strokes. By blending eastern and western cultures, Tchan has established a unique *Tchan Style* that mixes poetic elements and traditional Chinese cultural flavour.

Kan Hing-fook — Rhythm of Light and Colour

Kan Hing-fook (1921-) studied western painting in the Shanghai Fine Arts Academy in 1942 where he also studied painting and sculpture under the famous artists Liu Haisu (1896-1994) and Zhang Chongren (1907-1998) respectively. Greatly influenced by western European art, he was particularly moved by the works of the Impressionist⁵ masters. His interest in photography budded in 1938. After moving to Hong Kong from Shanghai in 1948, he engaged exclusively in photography. Kan not only devotes himself to photographing, but also contributes greatly to the activities of the Hong Kong photographic circles.

Kan's work attracted great admiration even in his earliest days. Fine examples can be seen in *Hermitage* (Fig. 9), *Water Palette* (Fig. 10) and *Soaring Wings* (Fig. 11) made between 1951 and 1953. Amongst them, *Water Palette* and *Soaring Wings* achieved an impressive record by winning more than 60 awards in international salons. In 1954,

⁴ The "Top Ten" refers to the top ten winners of photographic competitions worldwide based on data provided by the Photographic Society of America.

⁵ Impressionism appeared in French modern painting in the 1860s. Stressing man's sensibilities and his impressions of light and shadow made by outside objects, it sparked an era of art renewal in terms of creative technique. Subsequently, Post-impressionism evolved, representative characters of which were Claude Monet (1840-1926) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890).

he won the gold medal in the 8th International Salon of Photography with *Water Palette*, hosted by the Photographic Society of Hong Kong. He was the first Chinese photographer to receive this great honour. It is noteworthy that this same photo was designated a classic Chinese photograph of the 20th century by the China National Promotion Association of the Ministry of Culture. *Hermitage* (1951) won high acclaim from the master of Chinese painting Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) who added a poem to it by way of autograph. Kan's works are enriched with a rhythm born of light and colour. His works, *Life is but a Dream* (Fig. 12) and *The Inherited Rhyme of van Gogh* (Fig. 13) clearly show influences of the Impressionist school. While capturing images, Kan places great emphasis on light and colour techniques to express the creativity of the photographer.

Leo K. K. Wong — Individuality, Strength and Conciseness

Leo K. K. Wong (1932-) studied photography since 1966 under S.F. Dan (1906-1987), one of Hong Kong's first master photographers. In the 1970s, he ranked amongst the world's Top Ten photographers nine times with his participation in international salons. In the 1980s, Wong was attracted to and influenced by the master Chinese painter Zhu Qizhan (1892-1996) with whom he built a friendship that transcended their considerable difference in age. He was deeply influenced by Zhu's consummate use of light and colour, as well as his expressiveness through individuality, strength and conciseness. These became the main inspirations for his photography. Wong has also played an active role in preserving and promoting art photography. He was the Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the exhibition "Vision Beyond – Hong Kong Art 1900-2000", participated in the publication of the catalogue and donated many important historical materials and photographic works to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum.

Individuality:

Being faithful to one's own individuality and not relying on legacy of style, or blindly paying homage to any master or school.

Strength:

Does not only refer to the strength of the brush, but the strength of the artist's conception, or the depth of the artist's thoughts.

Conciseness :

Simple and concise. These are the creative standards that the artist requires of himself.

The above definitions encapsulate the creative style of Zhu Qizhan that greatly influenced Wong. Moreover, Wong demands a sense of beauty from what he captures in daily life. For example, in *Tearful* (Fig. 14), Wong portrayed his daughter with tears running down her cheeks. Her tearful face and pouting lips show how the father's affection has been kindled. In *Rainy Day* (Fig. 15), raincoats of vivid colours brighten up a gloomy street corner, while *Spring Condensed* (Fig. 16), *Autumn Colours* (Fig. 17), *Metamorphosis* (Fig. 18) and *Absinthe* (Fig. 19) show the subtlety and charms of nature. All these exemplify Wong's work with themes of individuality, strength and conciseness.

Pictorial Photography

*Travel to the end of the river,
Sit up and watch the clouds rise.*

*None knows that I am here, deep in the woods,
Only the bright moon comes to shine on me.*

*After rain in a quiet mountain,
Comfortable weather comes late at autumn.
A bright moon shines among pine trees,
Brook flows on a rocky stream.*

*The hills are empty with no one in sight,
Yet voices echo here.
Back in the woods,
Slanting sunlight falls on the jade-green moss.*

The above stanzas were extracted from poems of the famous Tang dynasty (618-907) poet and painter, Wang Wei (circa 701-761). Another great literati, Su Shi (1037-1101), of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) lauded Wang Wei's works as "rich in lyrical conception and reflecting poetic sentiments". It shows that elegant literary works have one thing in common: whatever form they take, words can come together to create a picture, while an image can inspire others to write poetry. In the same way, pictorial photography pursues aesthetics and poetic charm. Everything that catches the eye is detected by the pictorialist photographer. Keen vision ignites inspiration. With mature technology, photographic artists search for ultimate beauty and touching moments in an ever-changing world, so that more people can share these unforgettable scenes.

The Hong Kong Heritage Museum has dedicated 2009 to great masters. To pay homage to the three local masters, Tchan Fou-li, Kan Hing-fook and Leo K. K. Wong, "The Verve of Light and Shadow" marks the kick-off of "A Salute to Masters" Programme series. To help the audience become better acquainted with their creative concepts, 40 outstanding works from each photographer spanning different stages are shown in parallel for easy comparison. Together, these 120 works illustrate the golden years of pictorial-artistic photography in Hong Kong. Amongst the exhibits are authentic works of master Chinese painters Wu Guangzhong, Zhu Qizhan, Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and Li Jian (1747 - 1799). We hope this exhibition is able to provide the audience with a better understanding of the development and achievements made by Hong Kong photographers, as well as the role Hong Kong has played in the history of Chinese photographic art.

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Plates

Fig. 1
War and Peace
Tchan Fou-li
1951



Fig. 2
Survival
Tchan Fou-li
1957

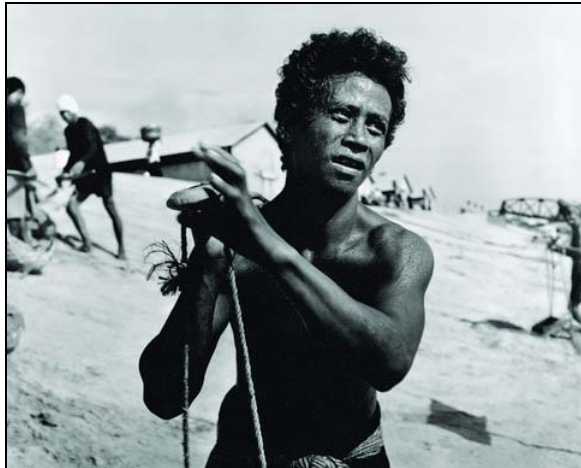


Fig. 3
Surge of the sea
Tchan Fou-li
1967



Fig. 4
The glowing pines
Tchan Fou-li
1978



Fig. 5
Winter habitat
Tchan Fou-li
1982



Fig. 6
Autumn leaves
Tchan Fou-li
1990

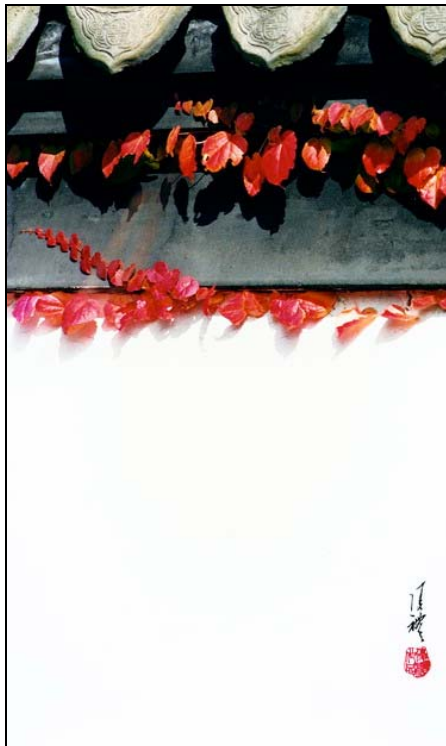


Fig. 7
Shadow
Tchan Fou-li
1990



Fig. 8
First sign of autumn
Tchan Fou-li
1983



Fig. 9
Hermitage
Kan Hing-fook
1951



Fig. 10
Water Palette
Kan Hing-fook
1953

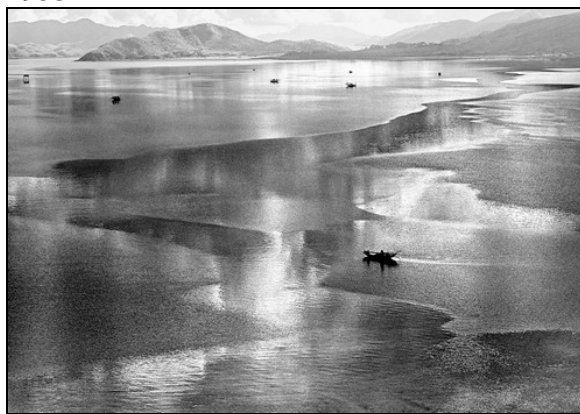


Fig. 11
Soaring wings
Kan Hing-fook
1953



Fig. 12
Life is but a dream
Kan Hing-fook
1998

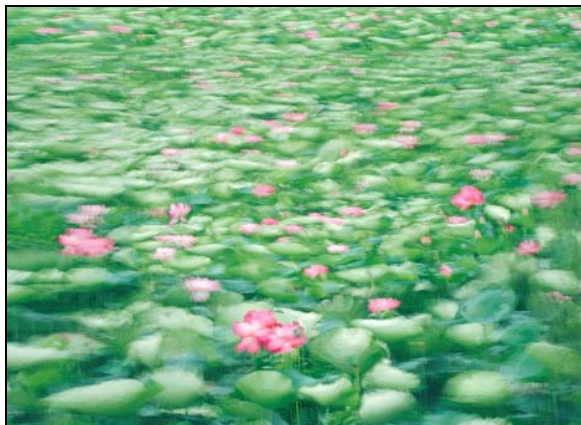


Fig. 13
The inherited rhyme of van Gogh
Kan Hing-fook
1999



Fig. 14
Tearful
Leo K.K. Wong
1969



Fig. 15
Rainy day
Leo K.K. Wong
1999



Fig. 16
Spring condensed
Leo K.K. Wong
2007



Fig. 17
Autumn colours
Leo K.K. Wong
2005



Fig. 18
Metamorphosis
Leo K.K. Wong
2008



Fig. 19
Absinthe
Leo K.K. Wong
2004

