

Kan Hing-fook—In Everlasting Pursuit of Absolute Perfection

In 1861, British portrait photographer Jabez Hughes (1819-1884) classified photography into three categories: mechanical, art and high art. In his view, high art photography served a loftier purpose than art photography through its ability to instruct, purify and ennoble. This function of promoting culture and refinement stressed by Hughes became a spiritual goal for artists who pursued pictorial photography of the time. Kan Hing-fook, a master pictorialist of Hong Kong, has been active in this city's photography circles for more than 70 years, during which time he has brought enjoyment and enlightenment to the public through pictorial photography. Whether documentary images of social scenes or landscape photos, the works of Kan Hing-fook reflect his incessant pursuit of perfection in content and form, spirit and presentation. Kan firmly believes that the picture-like "beauty" in photographic works can convey "the best" of life. To create a perfect photo, he has grown accustomed to travelling the Mainland and other parts of the world. As a man of great perseverance and dedication, he is a photographer who continues to inspire with outstanding works.

Kan Hing-fook began his photographic career in 1938. With no guidance from any mentor, he found his own way and direction. It was a time when the variety magazine *The Companion Pictorial* regularly ran features on renowned photographers like Lang Jingshan (1892-1995) and Chen Chuanlin (1897-1945) which included their photographic theories as well as examples of their art photography. Kan was greatly influenced and motivated by these masters in particular. In 1942, Kan studied western painting in the Shanghai Fine Art Academy under master painter Liu Haisu (1896-1994) and the great sculptor, Zhang Chongren (1907-1998). Liu's revolutionary east-meets-west approach deeply impacted the young Kan. These Chinese and Western art elements nurtured Kan's creative thinking and subsequently appeared in his photographic art. Such influences can readily be observed in Kan's works where his subjects are expressed by means of his unique pictorial composition and individual style.

Since arriving in Hong Kong from Shanghai as a businessman in 1948, Kan's photographic pursuit has never faltered or been interrupted. His early monochrome portraits were taken in Hong Kong and Macau. Most of these depict the hardships faced by the working classes and their call for peace and social stability. Kan expressed his love and concern for society through the language of photography. While reflecting everyday life in Hong Kong in the early years, his works have also contributed significantly to the local photographic scene by inspiring in others to excel in art expression. In works like *Gateway to Freedom* (Fig. 1) and *The Temple Step* (Fig. 2), Kan captures moments of joy in common frugal life. In these photos, the characters march towards the sun conveying a message that people should pursue a bright and decent future. As photographs with strong backlighting, they both convey a bold effect that sharply delineates the contours of the subjects like paper-cut silhouettes. At the same time, their projected shadows suggest a sense of space and depth. Works like these illustrate Kan's serious effort in studying the expression of light and shadow. Such bold and innovative lighting techniques encouraged many photographers of the time.

Many landscape photos taken by Kan Hing-fook in the 1950s became world class salon masterpieces. Among them, *Hermitage* (Fig. 3) was rated best photograph of the year by the Photographic Society of Hong Kong. An aerial shot, this photograph is rich in monochrome gradation and attracts viewers with a special charm akin to that

of a Chinese painting. The interplay between spaces and hills generates serial changes of illusion and reality resulting in a rhythmic vitality. Hills appear as if made by ink dyeing, with objects from far and near differentiated by intense and pale tones that create a distant aspect. His magnificent portrayal of mountains enables viewers to know how grand the Huangshan is. With a clever use of composition, Kan presents three of Huangshan's natural wonders: a sea of clouds, wonderful pines and strangely shaped rocks. Another famous work, *Water Palette* (Fig. 4) in 1953, is a photo of scenic Tolo Harbour in Shatin, Hong Kong. Swept by a soft breeze, the sea undulates along elegant rhythmic lines. Illuminated by sunlight coming from the opposite direction, gradation is distinctive and orderly. It is amazing to note that this particular scene lasted just half a minute! It takes a remarkably quick-handed photographer to capture such moments in their full glory. Illustrating the verve and charm of interaction between light and shadow and as a testament to Kan's mature photographic skills, this photo won the gold award at the 8th International Salon organised by the Photographic Society of Hong Kong. It made headline news in Hong Kong photographic circles because it was the first time the gold award had ever gone to a Chinese photographer. Kan's black-and-white photos are meticulously composed so that viewers can sense the beauty of natural landscapes. His artistic appeal can be compared to the Californian Yosemite National Park series by renowned US landscape photographer, Ansel Adams (1902-1984). Works by both masters focus on the tonal variation of black-and-white gradation while possessing subtle yet profound artistic comprehension. Both artists capture the grandeur and splendour of nature with acute observation and perfect photographic skills, and present them in highly captivating photos.

To Kan Hing-fook, it is more gratifying to travel great distances for a great photo with enchanting scenery than to win a photographic award. Since the 1960s, he has travelled across China and other parts of the world to capture beautiful natural vistas. He is not dissuaded by any obstacles encountered along the way towards achieving these ends. Despite injury and even a traffic accident, he fearlessly continues his quest. Kan has visited remote mountain regions and rural villages in search of new subjects. Often lasting from dawn to dusk, a typical day's search may not bear fruit, but he never complains. Kan does not believe that outstanding photographic works materialize by chance. He believes that it is imperative to make repeated trials and studies until one finds a context for a breakthrough that culminates in capturing a good shot. To create truly excellent works, photographers must make endless attempts. In photographic presentation, Kan has always been innovative and open to new approaches. In the wake of advances in digital technology, he began using computer techniques to strengthen the visual impact of his work in the 1990s. This has widened the creative scope of his art photography considerably. In *Herdling in Spring* (Fig. 5) and *Startled* (Fig. 6), taken on the Yunnan plateau and in Yellowstone National Park, respectively, Kan felt the actual natural landscapes were a little desolate and that the compositions were too simple, so he cut and pasted the images of shepherd girls, sheep and egrets from other sources into the photos for added vitality. After synthesising these images, he carefully adjusted the overall colours and gradations to make the subjects appear natural. Working with computer software in this way, Kan has been able to create perfect landscapes and to fully express personal emotions through various objects.

Kan's early relationship with art budded in his teens. He studied Western arts and was fascinated by the Impressionist school of Western Europe which advocated the study of how light and shadow affect colours, and the expression of momentary scenes

where the inherent interplay of change amongst these elements is visible. Kan was inspired by Impressionist paintings and sought reference from their discipline of artistic treatment and execution. In so doing, he found elements suitable for application to photography. For example, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was an expert in using strong colours and brushstrokes to express personal feelings. In this vein, Kan has attempted to infuse his photographic works with such characteristics and succeeded in creating photos enriched with strong objective sentiments through the ingenious use of colour and variations in gradation. In *The Inherited Rhyme of van Gogh* (Fig. 7) of 1999, one sees the artistic concept is derived from the painting *Wheatfield with Crows* by van Gogh. The photo purposefully strengthens the expression of colours, and the gradation of the sky recalls van Gogh's powerful brushstrokes that come together to strongly impact the viewer. Another work, *Life is But a Dream* (Fig. 8), is inspired by the celebrated *Water-Lily Pond* series by Claude Monet (1840-1926). Juxtaposition of light and colours generates a highly creative mood. The lotus pond, buffeted by the strong winds of the rainstorm, presents a dynamic scene. Kan used a slow shutter speed to catch the violent movements of the flowers transforming them into colour blocks much like those objects seen in abstract paintings. The result elevates the viewer to an insightful dimension where self existence is temporarily forgotten.

Kan feels that photographic art must be pursued with feverish enthusiasm. Just like the Impressionist painters, he himself is also a passionate artist. Now approaching his nineties, Kan's love for and dedication to photography are as keen as ever. He continues to move us with great commitment and perseverance. He combines Western and Chinese painting theories and applies them in his photographic works. Kan has dedicated his life to influencing people through a photographic ideal that blends beauty and perfection. For half a century, his artistic works have influenced local and overseas photography enthusiasts alike. Indeed, he has written an important page in the history of photography in Hong Kong.

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Plates

Fig. 1
Gateway to freedom
Kan Hing-fook
1950



Fig. 2
The temple step
Kan Hing-fook
1955

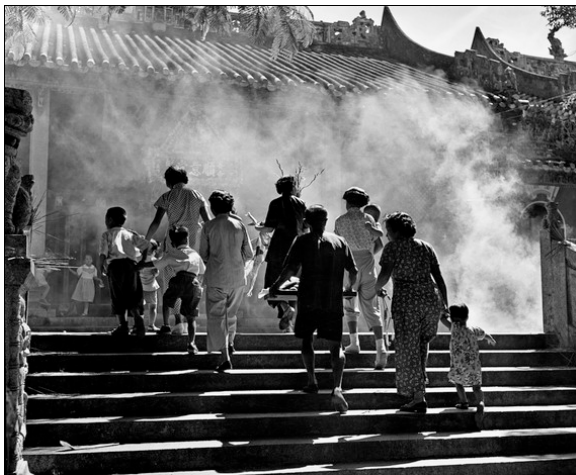


Fig. 3
Hermitage
Kan Hing-fook
1951



Fig. 4
Water Palette
Kan Hing-fook
1953



Fig. 5
Herding in spring
Kan Hing-fook
1998



Fig. 6
Startled
Kan Hing-fook
2000



Fig. 7
The inherited rhyme of van Gogh
Kan Hing-fook
1999



Fig. 8
Life is but a dream
Kan Hing-fook
1998

