

The Point of Departure in the Paintings of Chong Soo Pieng

Chong Soo Pieng is one of the eminent artists of our times in South East Asia. His paintings achieve a unique effect by his utilising an Expressionistic technique and by his portraying Malayan and Bali topics. From the point of view of Western Art, he is an artist who excels in expression and equally, from the standpoint of Chinese Painting, he is held to be no less the same. As he has grasped the modern technique in arranging themes on real life to convey his vivid feelings and moods, he preserves a creative spirit without abandoning reality which fits in with the highest ideal of any work of art.

Although "Expressionism" is a term of Western Art, it is by no means a conception novel to Eastern Art, being already in an embryo state in the Easterner's subjective portrayal of nature from early times. Not only is distortion frequently found in Eastern Art, but in addition there is adaptation and intricate composition. Although standards and tendencies differ somewhat, the point of departure in both is the same.

Wang Mei, the celebrated poet and artist of the T'ang Dynasty, remarked in his treatises on "Shan Shui" (Chinese landscape painting) that: "In all Shan Shui painting, the artist must have a preconceived idea." So-called "Shan Shui" is nothing but the landscape painting of Western Art. The sudden rise of landscape painting in the West occurred at the time Impressionism was at its peak. At that time, the artist shouldered his art implements and set out for the country where he painted exactly what he saw. He certainly did not harbour any "preconceived ideas". Actually, the conception of a "preconceived idea" belongs within the sphere of Expressionism. In Chinese Painting, this conception has not only been expounded by famous treatises, but it has also been in actual practice for quite some time.

Another author of the T'ang Dynasty, Chang Yen Yuan, explains in his account of famous historical artists, that: "The substance and form (of a painting) both have their roots in an established conception." This clarifies the point that distortionism and Expressionism in Chinese Painting springs from a preconceived idea. Later, Ching Hao of the Five Dynasties states in his notes: "The element of fascination held within the limits of the painting

is unfathomable — its difference from the actual landscape lies rather in its underlying principle whose manifestation relies upon the artist's brush." This is truly the beginning of Expressionism. The fact that Chong Soo Pieng is able to express himself so basically through the medium of Chinese Art without ever having undergone instruction in that field must be due to his having grasped the fundamentals of Expressionism and having employed them as a point of departure. This together with his talent in representing the subject and his vital force in applying colour to the particular object, he could not but attain overwhelming success.

The highest peak of Expression in Chinese Painting is considered to be "atmosphere and life-likeness," and not just objective portrayal. To paint flowers, plants, birds, and insects rich in life-like rhythm and vitality is only possible if the subjects are translated through the human emotions. In other words, it is the conveying of natural phenomena through the high ideals of the artist which makes a painting abound in individual naturalness and in creative significance. This tallies precisely with the artistic ideals of Expressionism. What is conveyed by Expressionism in an artist's work is not a mere portrayal of an object in reality, but the attaining of harmony, the expression of the thoughts and sentiments of mankind through the artist's ideals, by his sense of depth and volume along well defined lines in formal composition. The oil and water-colour paintings of Chong Soo Pieng are firmly founded on this ideal.

Printed in this Collection are some of Chong Soo Pieng's select works. What we are thankful for on behalf of Malayan Art, is the artist's enthusiastic interest in local topics, expressing abundant feelings of sincerity. Because of his subjective portrayals, superb impressions, stylised lines, and strong colours, a new light will undoubtedly appear upon the monument of Malayan Art to lead young artists along a new path in creation.

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