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Graceful and Reserved Style —Lee Chung-chung's Modern Ink Paintings

by Hsiao Chiung-jui

It is unfair to assess Lee Chung-chung's artistic expression in terms of gender. As a female Ink Painting vastly outnumbered by males, she is nonetheless a standout. Her works contain traditional sedateness and modern agility, boldness and vigor combined with soft and pliant beauty. She creates contemporary Ink Paintings that simply may not be ignored.

Born into a decidedly artistic Tunhsi, Anhwei family in 1942, Lee came to Taiwan with her parents less than five years later. Lee Chin-yu, her father, was a keen student of modern artistic intellectuals; he graduated from Beijing Art College much earlier, having specialized in ink painting. Upon arrival in Taiwan he worked at Taiwan Salt Corporation's Chiku processing plant while his daughter spent her happy childhood in the quiet southern countryside.

Her father, who studied art on Mainland China, brought many sketchpads, books to Taiwan, and she would spend most of her weekends and holidays at beach with brothers, her childhood filled with art works from those books along with blue sky, salt mount, sand beach, and sunshine. These memories also became part of her creative resources in later days.

Her father would get off work and return home, then take up drawing right after supper, with daughter Chung-chung watching and learning by his side. This kind of special attention, plus a mindset it imbued her with, exerted lifelong influence on her.

When she was a little older, her father taught her to write characters and draw pictures. Calligraphy styles of Yan Zhen-qing and Chang Hei-nui are included in her practicing scripts.

During summer vacation her father would "assign" some "homework" to her, as it were: at least one drawing a day. Consequently, while other children whiled away the days whooping it up outdoors, she had already formed a much more sedate habit with her artistic hobby, deriving greater enjoyment from writing and drawing.

This kind of sketching and calligraphy fascinated her; over time it became almost second nature. Although her mother would order her to

help out with sweeping and scrubbing floors, she would also take up a great brush pen and clear boiling water so as to draw and/or write on the smooth surface, then wipe everything away, delighting in this immensely. Thus she simultaneously helped in the home while pursuing her artistic avocation.

Ink Painting was the medium through which Lee Chung-chung made her debut in the world of painting at a time when she still had neither creative intentions nor concepts of modern art. Yet her playing around with water colors and ink eventually grew into a vocation and skill.

The senior high school she attended was Northgate in Tainan County, which has become known for producing many artists and whose then- principal took a special interest in art education. All one had to do was show a bit of artistic expression to earn some chance at performing in public. During her junior year, under the auspices of her teacher, Chung-chung, her older brother and underclassman Lee I-hung (destined for similar renown as an Ink Painting) held a joint exhibit at school, with their works filling an entire classroom and depicting every imaginable kind of content, which aroused the highly vocal enthusiasm over everyone.

Considering the enormous burdens carried by six siblings in the household, Lee Chung-chung, grown to maturity by then, graduated from high school and enrolled in Fuhsing Kang Political Warfare College's Art Department. While there she not only started her art education at the advanced level but also availed herself of opportunities to contact every form of artistic expression. From singing Peking Opera, writing script for plays and performing on stage to design and production of costumes, it all added up to a youthful and happy student life, most fulfilling for this young lady who loved the fine arts.

In the realm of painting she began to spend ever more time following the style of oil portraits by Lin Ko-kung, her teacher, which became the bedrock of her creative realism and descriptive ability.

In 1965 she graduated from Fuhsing Kang College. The following year she and her father opened a joint portrait exhibit. She learned so

well from her father, that quite often people find difficult to separate her artworks from her father's.

As of 1967 she, along with other painting enthusiasts like Wang I, Chin Kai-chin, Lin Shun-hsiung, Shen Lin-pin, et al., organized the Pen Er Artistic Conference.

During this time frame she actively joined various activities and painted in ink a giant canvas for the Central Academic Hall.

It is readily apparent that after her formal schooling she pursued oil painting for a period of two or three years. Yet her creative medium was still her first love, that which she had nurtured in her childhood: ink painting. It followed naturally, in that she herself felt this genre best suited to expressing her nature and her moods. Still, her training in oils at the art school also asserted itself and gave her quite a boost. In her words: "Practicing oil painting imbued me with experiences and consciousness that emboldened me to achieve breakthroughs and creations."

Still, in truly focusing on the issue of creativity, there is a deeper level to consider: those events of 1968 and beyond. That was the year Lee Chung-chung joined the Chinese Ink Painting Study Association led by Liu Kwo-sung and others, whose initiative was aimed at making modern ink sketching materialize and expand.

This modern drawing movement in Taiwan originated in the late 1950s, when Lee Chung-sheng, director of the Association, had guided the Oriental Painting Society members such as Hsiao Chin, Hsiao Ming-hsien, Hsia Yang and Ouyang Wen-wan. These had already logged experience with ink and brush pens in turning out myriad unrealistic images.

In 1962, at the fifth annual May Painting Exhibition, Liu Kuo-sung, later to become a key figure in promoting post-modern ink painting, displayed his creative abstract Ink Paintings for the first time. Other members like Chung Jeh and Fung Chung-zwei also presented their similar styles with different topics. Among them, the famous poet Yu Kuan-chung, the most powerful theory advocate, and the scholar Chang Lung-yen both provided their support, eventually it brought about the most influential modern water painting movement in Taiwan since the 1960s.

The year 1968 saw many Taiwanese painters undertake creative ink drawing; when Liu Kwo-sung spearheaded the founding of the Chinese Ink Painting Association in Taipei, Lee Chung-chung was a charter member. In June of 1970 the National Palace Museum in Taipei sponsored its Forum on Ancient Chinese Painting, a large-scale international academic conference. The Association took advantage of the opportunity to promote ink sketching displays that allowed people from overseas to glimpse the new face of Taiwanese ink drawing. In 1971 the Association, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the nation's founding as well as the Artistic Revival Movement, held an even bigger Chinese Ink Painting Exposition, in which Lee Chung-chung played a key role. More such confabs followed at the Cold Clouds Hall (1971) and American News Bureau (1975), in which she took on the promotional task each time.

What she inherited from family traditional water painting, along with scholastic oil painting training, plus abundant experience at exhibitions, Lee Chung-chung also devoted to the modern water ink painting. It is a retrospection of creative experiment. She deeply realizes how the medium of water ink contains endless possibilities, yet also understands the limitation of traditional expressive methods.

In the initial stage, she experimented with renewing the technical skill and painting material, tried many times with rubbing ink as main theme. Later she captured new meaning from the existing traditional brush ink and applied them in themes to form a brand new terminology. Various skills became auxiliary tools. Her style has appraised by literature scholar and art critic Yu Tien-chung as "rooted modern," designating her role in Taiwan's modern abstract water ink arts since 1980 as the most eye-catching and confirmed type.

Lee Chung-chung's art works, during the process of completely deserting the traditional form, also inherited the most amusing taste and spirit of Chinese traditional ink sketching. She thus not only possesses the modern form but also present the literary content of deep, moving tradition. Her creativity started from disposition and ended with ink tone.

Lee relates: "I wish my art works has the vibration like the elephant heavily put down its foot."

Her style is so different from her father's traditional way. To say good-bye to it is a bitter choice but also a must.

She said jokingly: "I used to get reviews from my father before art exhibitions, even allowed him to alter my art works." But she no longer lets him see any of her art pieces after she decided to try her own creative way.

Her father represents an age memorable but seemingly long past. Her determination to sever the part of tradition and successfully walk toward the modern expression, has become her father's pride. The unique style of modern form contains and transforms the traditional gentleness and inwardness which she inherited from father.

In 1977, She had a chance to travel to Europe. The field trip allowed her to see many important art works which she could only see on the printed matter before. The abundant collection in the western art museums greatly shocked her and provided her much more inspiration for self-retrospection and progress.

She said: "Chinese painting must introduce the modern concept to enrich their content. I have learnt from the past experiment and now feel very close to it and appreciate even much more."

She also said: "My art paintings are walked out from tradition. The traditional painting concept is linked to either the nature shape or from the inner subjective thinking. It was conservative and adapted to the ancient people's leisure life style. Modern people's lifestyle has greatly change,

we have to express in a more complicated way, can't still survive under the traditional shadow. No longer struggle under the chain lock of old fashion. Therefore I believe to reserve the Chinese traditional spirit and features, to express the modern life and mood, given the modern spirit and life, should be the right way to try with."

She masters in the quality feeling and changes of rhyme strokes on the most appropriate place moderate with orders heavy stroke with light expression., freely splash as will.

The 1980s found Lee's sketches attaining maturity and hence brimmed with many important works. One such painting was "Meditation among Trees"(1983).

Her works during that year included "Spring Visit", "Mountain", "Pursuit of Memories", "Autumn Thoughts", and "Dreams of Wandering through Endless Rivers and Mountains".

In 1984-85 her works took on even more water colors and such; she has since gradually changed to much brighter, softer, and brisk pace. Now she can fully relax, open mood, flow with cheerfulness of spring. This also constituted the main theme of her exhibit at the American Culture Center in 1984.

In 1985 she got the chance for a 25-day visit to India and Sri Lanka, where she viewed cities and other relics of ancient eastern civilization. This travel was akin to reading a huge book: while on the tour she never emphasized writing but took in various kinds of information, material, etc. After pondering and digesting these, she expressed them again subjectively. Works she produced upon returning from India belong to the type that can further enlighten people and can broaden their horizons.

She repeatedly appears and manifests herself between human beings and nature. "Accompany Me" (1985), "Sound of Autumn" (1985), "Autumn Wind"(1986), "Beyond Nature"(1986), "Return with the Flying Birds" (1986), "Beyond Mountains"(1986), "Mountain Thought" (1986), "View" (1987), "Love of Landscape"(1987), "Amusement of Landscape" (1987), and "Return to Nature"(1988), are masterpieces from that period time. Many of them have been collected by art museums.

From the time of her first ink drawing her works were continually requested at such displays in and out of Taiwan. At many of these fairs her paintings were perceived as extraordinary and/or transmitted to art news magazines.

In May of 1990 her chance to visit Mainland China came; she toured Yellow Mountain, Shuo River and other famous sights. This journey inculcated a deeper sense of what it means to transpose the beauty of China's terrain onto paper. The result was her "Images at Heart" series of landscapes drawn while on the tour.

In 1991 her ink portraits won approval from the Chinese Artistic Society in the form of their prestigious Modern Creative Ink Painting Award. That same year the gallery she had founded in Taipei City

held a large exhibition that drew great reviews and obtained numerous collections.

Aside from the abstract ink painting style, after 2000, Lee tried to involve more of the human side, thus creating a batch of works that portray human figures and imply objects. The field is enriched with flying, moving strokes and has revealed a delicate artistic theme therein.

In 1998 she took part in Mainland China's First International Biennial Ink Painting Exposition in Shenzhen, where she displayed the heart and soul of her longstanding creativity. This became food for thought among creative artists. As she put it:

"Water ink is a kind of thought, independent and humanized. It lingers with inner thought and spiritual inspiration, hides with poetic environment, fills with movement and life spirit, it contains thick ethic civilization.

In this field one expresses the concept of "dot," either big or small. The ink color strengthens the power of independence. Using a spirit of calligraphy or partial splash rubbing method, the formality naturally develops another kind of firmness and vibration in vision.

How to release Yuan (a kind of fate), a moving expression, combine the technical skill and Yuan for integration, to form a unique language of Chinese ink painting; to transform into a new life of Yuan?"

That same year she was invited to display her ink sketches at the distinguished Modern Artists and Standouts Exhibition in Paris, France, where it was extremely hard to gain any plaudits, the bulk of western materials displayed being in color, notably oil portraits.

From 2000 onward Lee Chung-chung's creations entered a stage of thematic serial paintings. Aside from continuing a "Great Earth's Spirit in Ink" series that began in 1995, along with a "Maintaining Perspicacious Thought" series originating in 1997, she has also embarked on the "Moving and Sedate" series of creations as of 2000; most are screen-type works done on canvas.

Among these works, Lee Chung-chung utilizes the contrast of different ink shades, fine lines, and color patches that reflect each other, to convey traditional Chinese philosophy that is both moving and sedate.

Lee Chung-chung has become a prominent success story and made vital contributions to the historic development of modern ink sketching in Taiwan. This emanates from the unique subtlety, elegance and thought of Chinese tradition, as manifested in her modern drawing style, such that she and her artwork complement one another: "pen and ink mixing with each other to transcend imagination," as a Chinese saying goes. Integration of pen and ink style, of masculine and feminine grace, mutual reflection of human and non-human nature, all combine to form this era's most valuable attitude and tone.

(translated by Charles H.Wagamon., Jr.)