

Learning Painting from Chow Kung Lei

Nowadays, in addition to learning painting from teachers, we can refer to countless beautifully printed art books. People in the past, however, lacked publications as references and could only rely on teachers for face-to-face guidance; that is why they often painted in the styles of their teachers and not of other masters.

Chow Kung Lei was more fortunate. Born into a wealthy family, Chow had access to some great silent teachers – his family's painting collection – and used them as study materials. He learnt to paint through the most basic method, copying and imitating, which allowed him to absorb the essence of a large variety of works, integrate various techniques, and develop his innovative style.

Chow's traditional Chinese paintings were deeply influenced by Wu Changshuo (1844-1927); like Wu, Chow was also renowned for painting flowers and birds. He adopted Wu's unique painting approaches, with a free flow of calligraphic brushstrokes and vibrant colours. Chow later studied Western art at school, which further enabled him to combine Chinese and Western painting techniques and improve traditional Chinese painting.

With an excellent academic background, Chow combined Chinese and Western styles in his art and excelled at ink, watercolour, sketching, oil painting, and sculpture. His other accomplishment was that, after immigrating to Hong Kong, he established an art school and contributed what he had learnt to future students. Chow's excellent paintings have become our silent teachers, demonstrating how to paint well.

Chow pointed out in one of his paintings, "When painting horses, the first thing is forming the posture. The second is that brushwork should be free, not pretentious, so as not to appear rigid. The third is that ink should appear moist and with light and dark shades to bring out the horses' three-dimensionality. The horses would then be true to life."

Chow also mentioned, "Painting pigeons is both difficult and easy. Difficult because each pigeon has a unique, vivid posture. Painters should observe the natural environment, spend time with pigeons in rural areas, pay attention to their movements, and sketch more from nature; that is the easy way to capture the essence of pigeons."

The paintings Chow left behind as teaching materials fully reflect the above key points.

Chow emphasised the importance of painting from life: to accurately depict the features of nature and the various postures of animals, one must become familiar with horses, pigeons, and other sceneries through painting from life. Chow asserted that brushwork should be unrestrained, and that quick brushwork can enliven the depicted object, giving it a sense of vitality.

Chow proposed that one should alternate dark and light ink and colours to show perspective space, and that darker colours should be in the front and lighter in the back. These are the only methods in Western art.

From Chow's sketches, we learn about the art of lines: short lines are added after long lines; horizontal lines intersect with vertical lines; oblique lines protrude on vertical lines; thin lines are placed between thick lines; solid lines and dashed lines (painted with a dry brush) are used together. These are the unique methods in traditional Chinese painting.

Chow loved to put the main figures in the background of paintings instead of the foreground. In his paintings, for example, pigeons usually stand behind flowers and trees or on huge rocks, and human figures often stand behind the bamboo forest in a supporting role. This method enriches the content of the painting and also clearly shows the depth of field on a flat paper surface.

Chow often adopted a juxtaposition of dense and sparse in terms of composition. His paintings often contain two groups of objects of different sizes: two smaller pigeons standing behind three pigeons; a tiny flower attached to two flowers; one miniature donkey following three donkeys; four small fish circling a bigger fish. While traditional Chinese painting generally does not depict the background, the texture and distance of the scene are reflected through the placement of two or three different groups of objects.

Chow loved to use bright red and contrasting green, other than the requisite black in traditional Chinese painting, to make an image more beautiful and eye-catching. His most innovative idea is depicting pigeon feathers and rose petals with white pigment. Pairing white with other colours creates a stronger contrast and makes the pigeons and roses more vivid.

Solid and void, gathered and dispersed, fresh and timeworn, dark and light, sparse and dense, rigid and soft, and moving and still are relative techniques that correspond with the traditional Chinese belief of *yin* and *yang*. Everything is made of these two elements, and Chow firmly grasped this mystery.

Chow also followed the Chinese art tradition of pursuing auspicious themes. The heroic eagle, mighty tiger, energetic horse, industrious donkey, virtuous chicken, peaceful pigeon, bountiful peony, and eternal rose often appear in his works. Chow's most outstanding works are his pigeons and red roses. He loved pigeons as he wished for a forever peaceful world. He favoured red roses because they bloom in all seasons, red is the most pleasing, and people like to convey their love with red roses.

Through his paintings, Chow wanted to spread the message of peace and love; this shows that he was both talented and virtuous. Sadly, he is still not a well-known master.

Chow's works blend the old and the new, the East and the West, and are worthy of conservation and study; his contribution to art education should also be remembered. An outstanding Hong Kong predecessor painter, Chow undoubtedly deserves to be deeply missed.

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