

In Memory of My Teacher Chow Kung Lei

I first met my teacher Chow Kung Lei in 1953, and it has been seventy years since. The world has undergone tremendous changes in over half a century, yet I still miss my teacher. The time goes back to when my mother put a ground floor one-bedroom flat in Kowloon City up for rent, and Teacher Chow rented it after viewing the street advertisement; that was the beginning of our lifelong teacher-student relationship.

That time was the most difficult of Teacher Chow's life as he was living from hand to mouth; however, he still taught me patiently. One night he got home late, and the front door was closed. When he knocked on the door in the back alley, I was drawing a self-portrait in a small room nearby. As he entered the room and saw my work, he disregarded his tiredness and demonstrated portrait sketching for me with a pencil. Even though he was already exhausting himself to support his family of five and had to take painkillers daily for his headache, he still taught me late at night. For that, I am very grateful and touched.

One time, I invited Teacher Chow to a workers' pantry to sketch some workers, and they warmly welcomed him. I stood behind him and observed how he created form with his first brush strokes; it was a precious learning opportunity. Teacher Chow was an oil painter, sketcher, and sculptor but seldom worked with oil paint later in life. He once rented a hotel room in Kowloon City to paint an oil portrait for a businessman, but such opportunities were hard to come by. In the late 1950s, Teacher Chow went to Macau to work on an oil portrait and a head sculpture for Ho Yin and lived in Ho's Edificio Chong San in Mid-levels for three years, during which he created many traditional Chinese paintings and Western paintings. In 1977, the Macau Government Tourism Office organised a large-scale exhibition for Teacher Chow; unfortunately, I could not attend.

Teacher Chow was also a master of traditional Chinese painting, excelling at bird-and-flower, landscape, and figure paintings. He is renowned for painting roses, known as "the King of Roses," and depicted the gorgeous roses with quick brushwork. Through imitating his works, I realised that drawing a rose is not easy and that drawing branches and leaves is even more complicated. I once asked Teacher Chow to paint on a large fan leaf, and he began with a white dove and drew three roses according to the shape of the fan leaf. How he drew the branches and leaves was remarkable: two stems were oblique and another vertical; the leaves turned and extended in space, gathered and dispersed for a volumetric effect. He then added a horizontal line between the two stems to create contrast. And he painted all in one go with confidence. His excellence in painting roses is most evident in his roses painted on gold paper. Other than roses, painting white pigeons was also his speciality. Like Qi Baishi's shrimps and Wu Zuoren's camels, Teacher Chow's pigeons came to life with the first brush strokes through his skilful brushwork and form-making.

Teacher Chow drew many ink and sketch portraits for me, and I also drew eighteen ink paintings and several sketch portraits for him as an opportunity to learn. While he was living in my house, rarely would calligraphers and painters visit him, but Gao Zhesheng and Luo Shuzhong were frequenters. He drew an excellent quick sketch in ink for Luo, a calligrapher,

and captured Luo's charm and essence with simple brushwork. This sketch is on view in this exhibition.

When Li Tiefu was alive, Teacher Chow and Li often went to the tea house, where Teacher Chow made quick sketches of Li and the surroundings. Sadly, those works are mostly lost, and only one remains, a drawing of Li's back; one can immediately recognise Li from it.

Teacher Chow was an all-round genius painter, yet he patiently taught a slow student like me. He was without much luck and suffered a great deal of hardship, and the recognition and attention he received in no way matched his artistic achievements. Teacher Chow lived in my house for about a year and then moved to Nathan Road and North Point, where his life gradually improved with more students and visitors but remained simple. In his later years, he became incontinent (I had helped him with laundry) and had no savings, yet he continued to devote himself wholeheartedly to teaching and creating art because, to Teacher Chow, art was more than life.

Thank you, Sun Museum, for this rare opportunity to showcase my collection of Teacher Chow's works to the public.

Ninety-year-old LEUNG Kai Wing